The Mermaid's Tale

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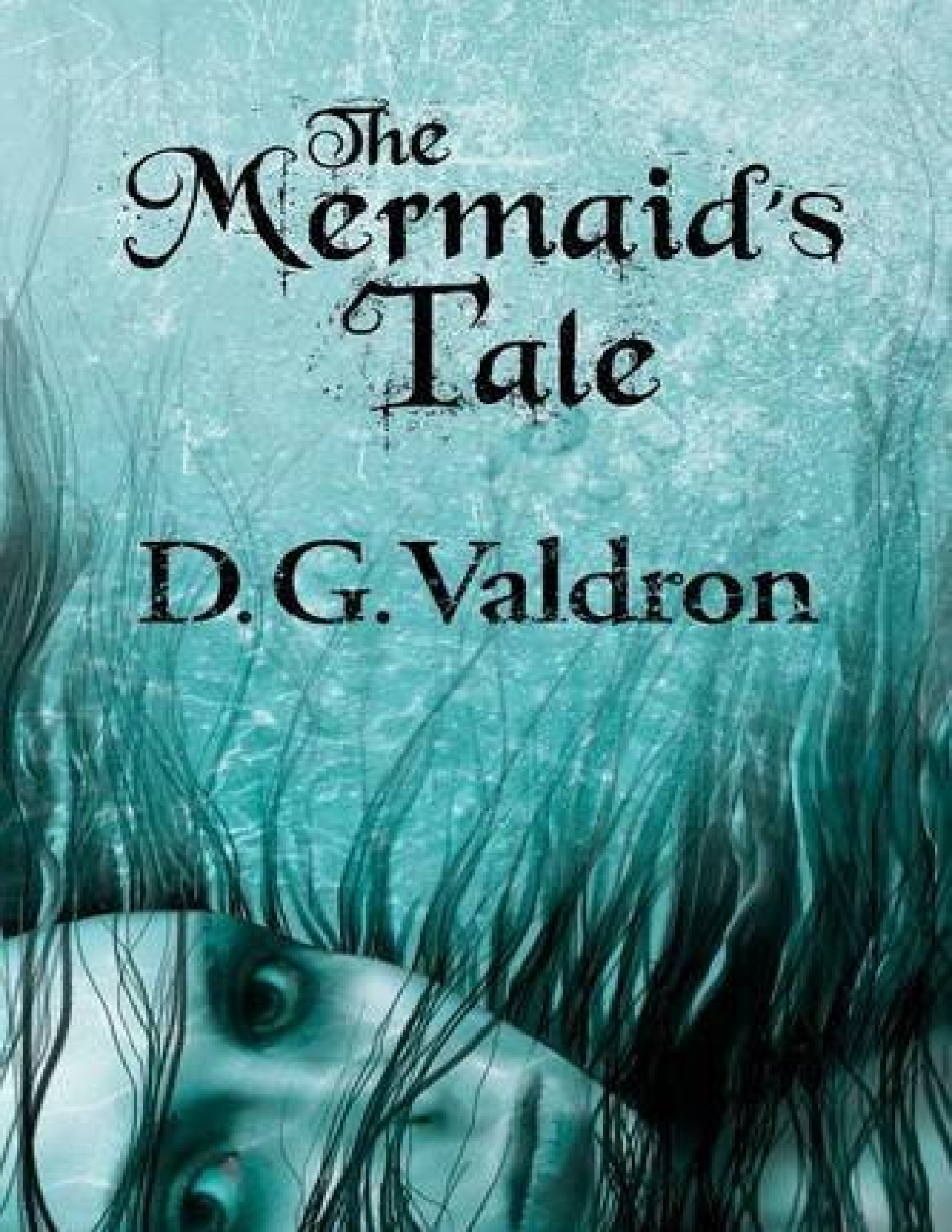

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For all those known and loved
loved and living, or loved and lost
Family and friends
Wherever you are
this is for you

It was a rough assembly of lumber, called the Mermaids' Dock, that reached into the shallow waters near the Selk domain. The water wasn't deep enough for most large craft this late in the season, so the dock had fallen into disuse. I could hear the rotting timbers creek under my feet as I went out to the end and sat down.

I'd heard that during the day people went out here hoping to see Mermaids. It was considered lucky by some to spot one, and luckier still to speak to one. I'd never given the matter much thought, but I wanted a quiet place, and I wanted to think. So here I was.

Adjusting mismatched pieces of leather and bronze armour, I made myself comfortable, dangling my feet over the edge of the dock. It was surprisingly peaceful out there, watching the water in its restless motion, the moonlight spilling over it. The Selk domains were just low, dark masses against the night sky.

I gradually became aware of splashing far out in the river mouth. The Mermaids? I couldn't be sure. There were small stones scattered about on the dock. Perhaps they had been left by pilgrims. I had no way of knowing. I just threw a few out, one after another, in the direction of the splashes. Maybe I was trying to get their attention, maybe I was just restless.

There was a splash right in front of me. A male reared up out of the water and fell back. Hurriedly, I pulled my legs in, afraid that if I let them dangle over the edge they would be pulled in and I would be drowned.

It surfaced again, this time more casually.

"Hi," he said.

From the waist up, at least, he looked like a Selk. He had shiny smooth

olive skin that glistened in the moonlight and looked like it would be slick to the touch. It covered a heavy torso and powerful arms. A thin even layer of fat covered what I could see of him, obscuring muscle and bone. Below the waist, I couldn't tell.

"Hi yourself," I told him.

He came closer to me. I stared at him, fascinated. His round head rested on a short neck. He had a wide mouth, thin lips and a pug nose, the nostrils opening and closing as he breathed. He had no hair, except for a stiff slick mane growing back from his head. His eyes were large, barely sunken at all. His face was flat, like humans. But where humans look childlike, he seemed different.

"You are a woman," he decided, finally.

I grinned at him, heavy brow wrinkling, and showed him large heavy canines.

"Female. If it matters."

"You have very big teeth," he said.

I bit back a reply, waiting to see what he would do next.

"I've never seen you here," he told me, "I've never seen a woman like you."

He was holding his place in the water just a few feet from me, bobbing slightly in a mannerly rhythm. His lank, flat mane was cut short. It covered his scalp and ran down the back of his neck to his spine. His wide mouth grinned up at me, showing flat teeth. His eyes, large and set wide, twinkled.

"Who comes here?" I asked it. I grinned back, not friendly, just showing him my sharp teeth.

"Humans mostly. Dwarves. Gnomes. Sometimes a few goblins. Once a giant walked right out into the water. He had legs like timbers." He swam in a circle beneath me.

"Have you ever seen anything like me? Smaller perhaps? A male?"

"I've never seen anything like you," he replied. "You are ugly. What are you?"

"I am Arukh."

It appeared to consider this.

"Is that your name?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"I have no name. I am Arukh."

"Your name is Arukh?"

"Arukh is what I am," I said patiently. "We have no names."

"What's an Arukh?" it asked.

"A mixed breed. A cross between a Vampire and a Goblin," I told it.

"That's why you have big teeth."

"Yes."

"You don't look like a Goblin. You're too big and heavy," he said. "Do you look like a vampire?"

I thought about the Vampires, tall and thin, ethereally graceful, with their long fingers and spidery limbs. Compared to them I was squat and massive. Ugly in their eyes. Vampires have no use for squat, ugly children.

"Are you a Mermaid or a Selk wasting my time?" I asked irritably.

Without replying, he dived. For a brief moment his tail waved in the air, the fishlike flukes slapping the water. A few drops splashed on me. That was an answer, I supposed.

He reappeared, blowing water. "I've never seen a Vampire. Why is that?"

"They don't like water. They can't swim."

He laughed and blew bubbles in the water.

"That's silly. Swimming is the easiest thing there is."

Demonstrating, it began to swim in powerful strokes, twisting and curling through the water. In spite of myself, I had to admire its grace.

"I've heard they drink blood. Is that true?"

I nodded, and then, not sure if it could see my nod or understand it, I spoke. "Yes, it's true."

"Do you drink blood?" it asked.

"No."

But it had evidently decided to turn to more interesting topics.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" he asked. He briefly rose out of the water to preen.

"Why do you care?"

"Did you come to see me because I'm beautiful?" Then it sobered for a moment. "I bet you are here for Mira."

"I'm here for Mira."

"I knew it. I knew Mira, I found her body. I heard that the Elders called upon a terrible, awful woman with sharp teeth to catch her killers. A killer herself. An Urisha. Is that you?"

He made it a soft sibilant sound.

"Arukh," I corrected. "It's me. Tell me about Mira."

"Orksa?"

"Close enough."

"First, tell me how beautiful I am."

I briefly considered pelting it with stones. But somehow, I was charmed in spite of myself. There was something so open, so free about it's manner, that I couldn't help liking it for the shallow, empty thing it was.

"You're beautiful," I said, "Tell me about Mira."

He disappeared beneath the water then. He didn't reappear for fifteen seconds. Then he burst through, splashing.

"Would you like to make love with me?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "Where did you find her body?"

"I don't believe you," he said. He swam on his back, his erection breaking through the water as if it were pursuing him. "I have a beautiful cock. I will give you much pleasure... Upriver."

"What?"

"We found her body upriver." He stopped, sinking into the water momentarily as he turned to face me. "Show me your nipples."

"No. I want you to tell me all about how you found her body."

"I won't tell you anything more until you show me your nipples."

"I won't."

"Please," it almost appeared to be pouting, "I'll tell you what you want to know."

In answer, I pulled at my tunic with my left hand, exposing one breast and a hard, dark nipple for an instant. He leaped in the water, splashing.

"I knew it. I knew it," he laughed. "You do want me. Come into the water, I'll bring you to meet the others and then we can make love."

"I can't swim," I told him.

He stopped dead in the water, looking up at me with childish wonder.

"Really?"

"Really. Now tell me."

"Cara found her."

"You said you found her."

He made a face. "We all found her. She came and got me and Venn and we brought her to the Elders. I think you should come out and talk to us all."

"I told you I can't swim. Can you bring them here?"

"No, we're at the gull rock tonight." His brow knit, as if he was thinking. "I can take you in a boat."

"No," I answered. "I told you, I can't swim and there is no boat."

He disappeared. I wasn't sure that he heard me.

I sat for a few moments, staring at the silent lapping waters. Waiting for him, or for another one to return.

He reappeared from around the side of the dock towing a small coracle. It was an oval woven boat, very small, very light. It looked very flimsy.

"Get in," he urged me.

He appeared to notice my expression. "Don't be afraid," he

told me, "I won't let anything happen. I won't let you drown."

He spoke with absolute sincerity.

"I promise," he told me.

"Arukh aren't afraid of anything," I snarled.

I would have to step into the boat. Death by drowning. There was something treacherous about water. I was suddenly nervous about these people that made it their home.

"Stay low," he cautioned me as I slid into it. The boat shifted inanimately under my weight. "The higher you are the easier it tips."

I grunted in response, and got as low as I could.

"Hey," his head and shoulders reappeared above the coracle and it lurched sickeningly, "you won't drink my blood, will you?"

"I promise." I told him. Satisfied, his head sank beneath the waves and the coracle began to move.

It flowed over the water with frightening speed, jerking and twisting on the waves. He seemed to pull and push constantly in different directions, as if it kept sliding from his grip. Behind me, the dock fell away rapidly. The roiling plane of the river expanding to become my world. It went on and on, and soon, from my low vantage, clinging to the bottom of the boat, I couldn't see any shape of land. My heart started to pound, my fingers scrabbled at the woven slats beneath me. Part of me wanted to leap up in panic, to run, to bolt. But I knew that if I did, the waters would have me and I would drown. I snarled involuntarily, the sound low and rasping in my throat.

The boat lurched again, rock bumping against its bottom. I heard musical voices piping. First a female one, then another. The boat pitched and a shadow fell across me. I snarled and tightened my grip.

"Is it dead?" someone called.

"It's frightened," a male voice, a different one said, "poor thing."

Water splashed over me, making me cringe involuntarily. I writhed and spat quiet fury, my hands gripping the wooden frame so tight it creaked against its lashings.

Suddenly I felt a scrape, as the coracle landed. For a moment, I refused to move. Then carefully, I raised my head above its rim. We had ridden up a reef. Flat stone slopes rose out of the water. I climbed out, sliding over the edge of the coracle, grateful for the feel of anything solid. I looked around, I couldn't see land anywhere. Panic surged up, what if they left me here to die. I forced it down. Shapes bobbed in the water.

"This is a Vampire." My friend introduced me, "She is here to learn about Mira."

"Does it drink blood?" a female voice asked.

I had seen my first Mermaid earlier that day.

Its eyes had been gouged out, its mouth a pulped ruin with only a stump for a tongue. One of its breasts had been slashed so that it was now just an empty sack of skin. Someone had shoved a knife deep into its sex and torn it open, and then cut down, stabbing and slashing until its tail had been cut into two uneven legs.

It had begun to bloat under the blistering sunlight, the flesh acquiring the puffy, indistinct look of decomposition. The flesh around its wounds was beginning to turn colour. Only its hair had retained traces of life, full and lustrous with stray hairs that waved in the breezes, like trapped refugees seeking rescue.

"We found her today," the first Elder had told me. "She was drifting down the reed marshes."

He was a little Selk, standing around the height of my shoulders. He was smooth the way they all are, dressed in paints and ornaments. Only thinning white hair betrayed his age. He hadn't looked happy. There were two other Elders with him, and a handful of Ublul guards. The Elders stood away, but the squat heavy Ublul surrounded me, weapons ready. They didn't look happy. But then who could tell with Selk? Their smooth placid faces betrayed nothing.

I noticed that they all kept their nostrils shut tight, it gave their faces a pinched look, full of displeasure.

They'd come in the middle of the day, the whole squad of them, marching into the Iron Pant's Lodge. Terrified to be there, but driven nevertheless.

They'd been looking for an Arukh. A clever Arukh. A particular, clever Arukh. Those of us who were awake had gathered around, crouching and listening as they argued with the Troll. We'd waited to see if they would all die when the Troll tired of them.

Instead, he'd sent them away, and sent me with them.

It seems I was the one they wanted.

It is not a good thing to be Arukh and wanted. That is why we keep no names. They'd taken me to the corpse, where it lay on a rough wooden platform on the beach near a fishing dock.

Selk were clustered all about, dozens of them, but kept their distance.

They seemed nervous and uncertain. The Ublul guards shooed them off.

I stared at the body.

"Her name is Mira," the Elder said.

"It was Mira," I shrugged, "now it's just meat."

It irritated me that he kept talking about meat as if it were a person.

"I did not do this," I told them.

I didn't think that they blamed me for it, but you never know. Perhaps they wanted me to face an accuser.

"Look at the body," the Elder commanded. "Tell us what you see."

I bent down to look at the corpse. I pulled the shades off my eyes. The sunlight stung, but I wanted a clear look at the wounds.

I slipped my finger into one of her wounds. There was a soft squishing sound as the flesh gave way.

"Too dry," I said reflectively, feeling the texture inside the wound. It was wet and sticky of course, slick with decomposition, but it was just meat feel. It didn't have that slipperiness that comes with being in the water.

"Whoever did this took her from the water, and left her on land."

The old Selk made a noise of disgust but did not stop me. Encouraged, I slid my finger all the way into the corpse. I slipped it around, feeling cool corpse flesh.

"Deep wound. Stabbing. A point knife, rather than a cutter," I said aloud.

I picked up a piece of wood and carved a long splinter from it. Gingerly, I began to probe the injuries. There were thirty-three wounds. Most of them were stabs.

"Let her be. Must you violate her any further?" an Elder asked me as I used the splinter to explore the stab wounds.

I chuckled, and didn't bother to reply. They'd brought me here and let me do this.

"Probably," I told him, "only one weapon was used. A knife with a blade about this long, this wide."

I showed him a six-inch length along the twig, and an inch width with my fingers. That was a short blade. Most knives were heavier and

averaged about a foot in the blade. I indicated a stab wound along the thigh.

"You see here? The blade went all the way in."

I pulled at ripped flesh at the top of the wound.

"This is the mark of the grip, where the blade stops and the handle starts. As it entered it tore and stretched rather than cut.

"The wounds are cut on both sides. It is unusual to find a knife sharp on both sides. Also, you see here," I indicated a stab wound just above the intact breast, "the back side of the knife is nicked. It tears the flesh a little. This is the clearest, but you can find it in most of the other wounds."

The Elder blanched, but held his ground.

"What else can you divine?" he asked.

"The knife was greased, animal fat." I pointed to two punctures up by her collarbone. "See these marks here. These were the first wounds. Greasing knives is common enough among fighters, is to allow knife to be pulled quickly."

I turned her body on its side.

"Few wounds in back, and those only punctures that went all the way through from the front. She was attacked from the front, probably on land or in a boat, lying on her back."

"No bruises," I said thoughtfully, examining her shoulders, her biceps. I grabbed a handful of hair and tugged it; it was firm. "She was not pulled from the water. She was found out of it, or lured. The attack did not come until later."

I held up a limp arm.

"She struggled. See the marks on her hands as she tried to stop the knife?"

I bent the wrist back for them, so they could see the hole. There was a slight cracking as the bones moved.

"Here the knife went right through the wrist, but was trapped by the bones. It had to be pulled back out. Must have been terribly painful. She must have screamed a lot."

I paused for a second. Waited. No one ventured anything.

"So, she had been killed someplace where her screams would not have

been heard. Or taken someplace."

I went on. "It was a very strong knife for its size, to go into the wrist like that. It should have snapped or bent. Not flint or stone. Those would have been short short blades, snap easily. Or inserted into a groove, it would have been jagged. Not copper either, too weak. Bronze, or something strong."

Iron, I decided. Someone had an iron knife. I kept that to myself. Iron was rare.

"It takes a lot of strength to drive a knife between bones like this and then pull it back out," I told them.

"Who did this?" the Elder asked.

Now we were getting down to the soft meat of the matter.

I let the meat fall onto its back, and waved my arm from the uppermost injury, to the lowest stab wound.

"Probably only one being. Just one weapon, no sign of any other person. Not Goblin," I told him. "Not enough strength. Hobgoblins, Dwarves, Kobolds, might have strength, don't have reach, the stab wounds are all over. Giants or Trolls: Too much reach, too small a knife."

I grinned up at him.

"Humans perhaps. Could be Selks. You know Selks that do work like this?"

They did not respond.

"Probably not Selks. Selks probably do it in water." My teeth bared with pleasure as they shuddered. "This was dry work. What do you think?"

"No Selks," one of the guards said. The Elders glanced at him. He bowed his head.

The guards weren't supposed to talk. I laughed.

"Vampires," I speculated. "But they kill different. And they wouldn't come near enough water to fish a Mermaid out."

I waited.

"Who did this?" I asked rhetorically. "Hard to say. Probably Arukh. One Arukh with a funny knife."

"Arash are known for madness," the Speaker of the Elders said,

pronouncing it oddly. Every race said our name differently. It didn't matter. It always meant the same thing.

I nodded. This was certainly the work of madness. Long after she had died her attacker had gone on stabbing. He had made a point of gouging out her eyes, and cutting out her tongue, and then he had gone through the effort of mutilating her sex and cutting her legs apart. Transforming her from a person into badly butchered meat. All unnecessary, pointless. It smelled of a particular kind of insanity.

My kind: We are mad, bad and dangerous to be around.

And whatever one of us did this was madder and badder still.

"Arukh," I said. "Orc. But you knew that?"

"It has the stink of madness, there is no mistaking the odour."

That was why they kept their nostrils shut. I reached down to the corpse and spread its ragged legs apart, the red and torn meat between its thighs an awful parody of a woman's sex. An Ublul moaned, behind me, voicing his disgust. I could feel them shifting around. I paid no attention.

An Arukh had done it. All you had to do was look at the mess it had made of the body, and you could tell. They could tell.

They didn't need me to come and probe a ruined body to tell them what they knew. What did they want then?

I shoved my fist up the torn raw meat, probed in its ruined abdomen until I came to a familiar slickness. A male Arukh then. I rubbed my finger in the trace, but did not bring it to my nose to smell. Decay would mask it.

No bones broken, I noted with surprise. A small male then. We like to break bones whenever we can.

They watched me for as long as they could stand it.

"Can you find the one who did this?" the Elder blurted. "Make sure it is never done again?"

"Arrah," I said, grinning, rising into a crouch. My heavy sharp teeth flashed at them as I bobbed my head at the Elders.

"You want me to hunt and kill my own people?" I asked him.

"Look upon their work!"

I glanced at the corpse.

"Plenty of good meat there still," I told them. "Good eating."

An Ublul, the one who'd spoken, stepped towards me, his weapon half raised. I bobbed my head submissively at him, ranging him.

He was bigger than the others. Bigger than other Ublul the way Ublul were bigger than most Selk. They were some northern swamp breed. The thin fat layer that made Selk seem sleek was thick with them, heavy rolls of it hanging from their bodies. The slickness of Selk skin that made it shine in the light was a soapy oil on them. The Ublul were slow and strong, patient defensive fighters. This one had thick white scars on his body, with clumsy stitch marks.

Easy to hurt, hard to stop. Let him move, I thought. Let him move and see what an Arukh can do.

"Slal," the Elder commanded. The big Ublul backed up.

I turned back to the Elders.

"Do you know which of you did this?"

"I can find him," I told them, thinking myself clever for my answer.

"We pay in gold. Three pieces now. Twelve pieces later."

"Pay me all now."

"No."

I shrugged and waited.

"Forget it then," I said, "all the world cheat an Arukh."

I watched them.

"We'll pay to the Troll, Iron Pants. He can hold between us."

I thought about that. Trolls often acted as go betweens, holding money. They were big enough nobody would take it from them, and honest enough not to cheat.

"I'll bring you his head," I told them finally.

"Then we are finished here," the Elder said.

"Wait," I said.

They looked at me.

"Why me?"

They looked at each other.

"There are stories," the Elder said finally, "of an Arukh. An Arukh that

gambles with High Gnomes."

A chill ran up my spine.

"There are many stories," I said, trying to grin. "Nothing to stories, just wind and farts."

I watched them, trying to look stupid, teeth barred in a half grin.

"You will do what will be done."

Without a further word they gathered up the corpse and carried it away. I watched with mild disappointment.

There was still good meat on that body.

Which was why I was stuck on a chunk of rock in the middle of the water with the city's lights far off in the distance, and mermaids dancing in the water around me.

They were a strange people. Their heads and voices would bob above the water for a moment. Then they would disappear and my heart would surge, my guts would coil. Suddenly, they'd surface somewhere else. I didn't like it, it was too much like magic. They should stay where I could see them, I thought.

They were disappointed that I did not drink blood. I think they were on the verge of asking me to drink some anyway, right there, and show them. But they quickly got over it.

Soon they were talking about my ugliness.

"She isn't ugly," a young female called out. "She's fierce."

"And she has very nice breasts," a male, the one who brought me here, added.

I could hear them arguing back and forth around me. Others swam up in ones and twos and asked me questions.

"Mira is dead," a young female told me soberly.

"I know. Your Elders have set me to find her killer."

"Nobody here did it," the young female had vanished, and was replaced by an older male who surfaced a few feet from where she had disappeared.

"I know. But I want to know about Mira, so I can find who killed her."

"What will you do when you find them? Will you drink their blood?" This came from a couple who surfaced farther out. They dove and surfaced a few feet apart for my answer.

Meanwhile the debate around me had reached a conclusion. The consensus was that I was ferocious-looking rather than ugly. My breasts were still an open question.

A Mermaid, a female with long hair and pert breasts, heaved itself out of the water onto the rock close to me. She sat there looking at me. I didn't move.

"Can I touch your teeth?" she asked, wide eyed.

I grinned for her, black lips tight across my skull, exposing as many teeth as I could. She reached out tentatively. I felt a trembling finger moved along my heavy jaw, trace the line of a fang. Abruptly, with a squeal and a splash, she was gone. The others hooted and splashed and leapt completely out of the water, excited by her reckless bravery.

A chorus of "Show us your breasts!" rose up.

They'd never seen anything like me. They'd never seen another Arukh.

Except for Mira.

Mira had seen another Arukh, I thought.

I could see how it might have coaxed her close enough to grab. These creatures showed no fear of me. No wariness.

I found myself relaxing. There was no danger for me in these people.

Rather, they showed a strange fascination with me, swimming close and asking all manner of questions.

At one point a child Mermaid, I could not tell its age or its sex, but it could have weighed no more than forty pounds, came swimming up and without a word offered me a comb carved from a seashell. I accepted it gravely and held still while the child creature reached up to my mouth and felt my lips and teeth.

A half dozen different conversations wove together from a score of them. They swam and danced in the water. Once or twice, I saw couples join and swim twisting through the water, as they had sex.

Questions and comments came and went in no particular order.

They asked about my race, my life, other races. They asked if I had

dreams, and what I thought that particular cloud looked like, and if I had ever killed anyone, and how many. They told me about the Selk and themselves, and they told me about Mira.

The Selk were a water people. They lived in and through the water and were more comfortable swimming than walking. They inhabited rivers and marshes, living off the bounties of the shores and waters, building elaborate lodges away from land.

They had dammed great rivers to make places where they could live, and had once had a mighty civilisation that had spread across the known world. It was all gone now, except for a few places like here. Outlying clans and villages had filtered in to join the community in the city, making the Selk a diverse and fractious people within their territories.

Mermaids were born to the Selk from time to time. Children whose hind limbs had failed to separate and became tails. The Selk revered them as holy beings. It was forbidden to harm one. They lived their entire lives at play and without fear, in the waters where their handicap did not hinder them.

Mira had been one of them. She had laughed and loved with them. Coupled with most of the males, and a legion of others besides. Everyone had loved Mira, she had no enemies that anyone had ever heard of. A few days ago, she had vanished.

"I found her," Cara said. Cara was the female with pert breasts who had amazed the others by coming out of the water to touch my teeth. "Upriver in the reeds. I was looking for sweetgrasses to burn for the full moon. She was in the mud. I swam away quickly and called for Venn and Gari."

"Was she in the water?" I asked.

"No, the best sweetgrasses grow in the mud shores; that's where she was."

"Did she like to go there?"

"No," Cara replied, "never. She didn't like to go on the mud shores. Besides, the sweetgrasses weren't ready yet. I could hardly find any. That's why I came so far out and found her."

"Aaah." So she'd been left there.

"Can you show me the place?"

Excited by the idea, they all clamoured to go. I climbed into the coracle again and felt it move upriver. As the boat started and stopped, drifted and lurched forward again and again, they clustered about, telling stories about Mira.

By the time we arrived, I thought I knew Mira very well indeed.

Dawn was starting to break as I stepped into the mud. I sank past my ankles, and floundered forward. Cara and a couple of others half swam, half pulled themselves across the shallows around me. They giggled and played with the viscous stuff, spattering each other with handfuls, squealing at the feel of it. It would wash off when they returned to the water, I supposed. Maybe that was their secret, everything washed off, nothing really touched them or stuck to them.

Well, not for Mira.

"This is it." Cara, hauling herself agilely on her arms, led me to a small area of flattened and broken grasses. I knelt. There were a few strands of hair. Mira's. I was impressed that they'd been able to find it again.

They hadn't struck me as very clever.

"It was her hair. I didn't know her at first, and then I recognised her hair, and I knew it was Mira."

Her voice seemed to crack. Her face tightened.

Distantly, I kneeled in the mud and ran my fingers through Cara's hair. She seemed to take comfort from my touch. This was the place. I could see trails leading from this place out to the water. Cara's trail, other Mermaids, finally the Elders who had come out to take the body. There was the mark of another flat-bottomed boat, one that had been dragged much closer. Not what I was looking for.

There was only one trail remnant leading farther onto land.

There wasn't much blood, I noticed. Not in the place they'd found her. Not on the trail out to land. Some, but not enough. The killing had been done elsewhere. The body had still been leaking a little. That meant it had been brought not long after the killing. Why bring it here? Had he meant for it to be found by the Mermaids? Probably not. By the Selk?

But if he came by land, perhaps he'd not meant the body to be found at

all? Drop it in a marsh, far from anywhere, let the carrion creatures have it.

There wasn't much else to see. The Mermaids had grown sombre around the site where the body had laid.

I left them behind and followed the trail inland. When I came to firm ground, I found a trampled spot with a little more of Mira's blood. There were hoof marks from a pair of horses. You could see where they'd grazed a bit as horses do, slightly apart, but keeping an eye on each other. A spot where one had urinated. Did that mean there were two who had killed Mira? Two with that stink of madness? Or had he used a second horse to carry the body? Where did the two horses come from? Did this signify wealth? Or connections to the Vampires?

I couldn't be sure. I thought about the odd knife that had been used. Small, strong, two bladed. The common metal was bronze.

Iron was much stronger, but rare and expensive. So much more so that iron knives tended to be smaller than ordinary bronze or copper ones. They were good knives though.

I suddenly wanted to meet its owner.

I saw carrion birds descending into the mudgrasses a hundred yards away from where Mira's body had laid. I walked over.

It was another body. I scattered the birds to see it better. Female. Severely mutilated. Its eyes had been gouged, its tongue torn out. The knife had cruelly cut its sex, sliding in and tearing open. I squatted to examine it carefully.

It had legs, so it wasn't another Mermaid. Long limbs, but flat teeth. Not a Dwarf then, or a Vampire.

Human or selk? Its feet were narrow, not wide for swimming, its fingers showed no trace of webbing.

Human.

By the look of it, the body had lain here for several days. Decay and the carrion creatures had been at work. Its wounds could tell me nothing. There was little more to learn from it. I sniffed. It was no longer even useable meat. The rags it had been left with reminded me of the Street of

Joy. It wore a copper armband with a rough but elaborate design scratched into it. Her own work probably, whoever she had been.

I took the armband and walked away, carefully turning around to sweep the sky. There was no other place carrion birds seemed to be circling. Any other bodies were too old to arouse their interest. I suspected that there were others here. They had not been meant to be found. That Mira had been found was just fortune.

I met the Mermaids at the coracle. I had little to say. I didn't tell them about the second body. Subdued by their proximity to Mira's resting place, they took me back to the wharf, stopping only a few times to play.

As I climbed onto the dock, I felt a hand on my thigh. It was Cara, looking wide-eyed and earnest.

"You will find the one who did this to Mira?" she asked.

"Yes," I told her.

Her face lit up in a glow of absolute trust and faith. She allowed herself to fall back into the water and splashed away.

Another one swam up.

"Fierce woman," he said, "promise us you'll come back and talk to us again."

There wasn't anything more I needed from them, but...

"I'll come back."

I stood watching them as they swam off.

I pondered my next move. It wasn't too hard to get a couple of horses, I decided. If you knew who to look for you could probably find someone who could tell you about a couple of horses that had been borrowed one night, and had come back with traces of blood or mud on them. They would confirm, but they wouldn't provide me with a key. I would have to know who to look for first.

I'd be better off looking for a smallish male Orc with an iron knife and a taste for butchery. There couldn't be too many of those around, I figured. Arukh with iron knives.

We all had the taste for butchery.

I came to a checkpoint. There hadn't been one here before. I stared at it

curiously. It sat at an intersection, a large diamond choking the square. It was rudely made with stonework and wood pulled from nearby buildings to form rough sloping walls atop which Dwarves stood. The tall stone buildings that sat at the intersection had been left alone. Inside I saw hide tents. It was very recent from the look of the tents. I smelled Dwarf fires from the tents, cooking their sour lichen tea.

A dozen Dwarves scurried back and forth, making their notes, haranguing those who passed near. I went to the side that seemed least busy. Three Dwarves, a lancer and two archers, guarded that corner.

"Stand," a Dwarf barked as I came up to them, his lance pointed at me. Ugly thing, it was a kralance, with a barbed head that stuck in you, and a crosspiece partway down that held you off while you died on the end of it.

I stopped.

"Hagrik," he said, the Dwarf word for Arukh.

I grinned and bobbed my head at him.

"Don't try me," he warned, shaking the lance. "And don't say that word. I'll gut you soon as look at you."

I stepped back.

"Honourable sir," I said.

"What do you want?"

"To pass, oh wise one," I told him. I hoped there wasn't a toll. I had only a few coins in my skin purse, enough for a horse.

"What's your Lodge? Vampire or Troll?"

"Iron Pants the Troll, near the walls of the Kingdom."

I tried to bow obsequiously, habitually gauging their range.

Their wall was not well made, perhaps five feet tall, sloping with many handholds. It was little better than a mound of rubble. I could scramble up it and be inside in seconds.

"One of ours," an archer whispered.

"What the hell is it doing this far up, then?" the lancer snapped. "It's Hagrik. It'll tear your throat out as soon as look at you."

"State your business," the first archer said. He had an arrow pulled, but

hadn't bothered to set it to bow, trusting his ability. He hadn't dealt with Arukh before.

I shuffled my feet, trying to select among lies.

"Goblins," I mumbled.

"Ghoklins?" the archer said. They had nothing against Goblins. This far up the edges of Dwarf territory, it could only be Vampires or Goblins that frightened them.

"Goblins want Arukh, for guard." I tried to look stupid and ingratiating.

The Dwarves looked at each other.

"Goblins are getting involved?" the second archer said, with better pronunciation than usual. "That's news."

"They wouldn't use Hagrik, they have Hhoklokic," the lancer grunted. Hhoklokic, Hobgoblins. "She's lying to us."

"They might seek Hagrik, for more strength. Hhoklokic are tough, but there's only so much they can do and so many of them. This could be important."

"She's lying, she's going to the bloodsuckers. We let her pass now, she'll be coming over the wall at us in a week."

I cocked my head, listening to the conversation, as they shifted deeper into dwarf speech. There were enough Dwarf words, mangled and corrupted in the trade speech that I could get their gist. They were worried.

They were in a bad position. The checkpoint was all right for controlling movement, but anything more, and they would be nothing more than an obstacle. War comes, Dwarves like these would be the first to die, defending some wooden shack that no one gave a shit about.

I guessed they were all low totem Dwarves, hoping for advancement, praying to be out of there if anything happened. Looking for a way into the Kingdom houses.

"No help for the Ghoklin until we see which way they swing. Maybe no help for them then either," the Lancer snapped at me finally, ending the debate.

I shuffled my feet and tried to look stupid and patient.

"Back to your Lodge," the lancer turned to me. "No work for

Wamphyre, no work for Ghoklin. You want fight, we hire."

"Hire now?" I bobbed my head.

"No hire now, go to lodge."

"No hire at lodge," I said, aping his pidgin.

"There'll be a lot of hiring at the Lodge," he said, "a big fight is coming. War."

"Always war," I said.

"Big one," the older archer replied. "Big war."

I waited a minute or more, but it seemed like they weren't going to change their mind.

Finally I turned and stalked off.

A trio of Kobolds followed me. They'd hung back. They had no hope of getting through the checkpoint, but they'd hovered behind, listening to the conversation.

"Orc Nation! Hail, from the Secret Kingdoms."

One of those. I hissed.

"Piss off," I snapped, "there is no nation, and your kingdom," I put emphasis on the word, "the Dwarves will crush you."

"They have tried."

"Arrah," I snarled.

"Is it true, what you said?" he persisted. "You go to join the Mothers? Are the Orc coming home?"

Coming home? I almost spat at them. An image of dead goblin mothers flashed in my mind, and my anger deflated a little.

"One Arukh?" I asked. "That's hardly a movement."

"But where you go, others follow."

I stopped and stared hard at them.

They backed up.

"Arukh go where they are paid," I said with finality. Daring them to respond.

"Where do you go?" one asked.

I shrugged. It wasn't as if they'd go back and tell the Dwarves. Kobolds hated Dwarves.

"Vampires," I said, grinning without humour and showing them teeth. They drew back. They had little love for Vampires either.

They tailed me for a distance, slowly losing interest. Kobolds are like that.

I headed south, looking for a way through. I passed four more Dwarf checkpoints, before I found a street I could walk. Then after ten minutes walking, I came to a place where the Dead Men had blocked the road entirely. I backed away as they watched. I had to retrace my steps as far as the Goblin market.

It was crowded in the Goblin market, with all manner of beings buying and selling. I passed the Street of Joy, and remembering the copper armlet, decided to return to it on my way back.

Evening was falling and the sky was starting to feel comfortable. The sun was low, hiding behind clouds: the sky was full of reds and purples, making the shadows long, furtive and welcoming; places to hide; places to flee.

The hives of the Goblins loomed like small hills, or the backs of strange beasts rising from the earth. In the distance, you could see the spires of the Dead Men, and behind it the massive stonework of Big Town.

I headed north from there, walking up the wide, packed boulevards that lead to the Vampire kingdom.

I came to a large clearing known as the Lesser Market. It was thick with stalls and trade buildings. This was one of the places where Dwarves and Vampires traded, but I could see other races in number. Off to my left, the tall buildings of the Dwarves, nine and ten stories, festooned with ropes and scaffolding, loomed in the distance.

Something was wrong.

My nostrils twitched.

There was tension in the air.

Horses pranced and tossed their heads, eyes rolling. Vampires rode with straight backs, perching neatly on their mounts. There were checkpoints, these large and heavily manned, almost stockades, along the Dwarf gateways. The Lesser Market was right up against the Dwarf kingdom, I realized suddenly.

I'd never thought of it before, but most of the city was empty lands. Not truly empty. Spaces inhabited by people of all sorts, but not directly under any kingdom. Each kingdom controlled a lesser territory within the city, widely separated from the other kingdoms.

Outside Dwarf kingdom, many Dwarves lived, perhaps most of them. So did Giants and Goblins and every other sort. Inside Dwarf kingdom, there was nothing but Dwarves.

I made for the right edges of the market, meaning to creep along the sides. I brushed against cattle and warriors of different races.

Every stall, almost every merchant had a handful of guards. They looked edgy.

Suddenly there was an ululating cry, and a band of horses thundered down a boulevard almost on top of me. I scrambled to get out of their way.

The Vampires let out a howl and wheeled their horses to meet the newcomers. Dwarves poured from the stockades, shouting and waving their weapons. Briefly, I paused near a tent stall staring in astonishment as the horses and their riders stormed past. My jaw dropped.

The horses were ridden by men. Humans were riding horses! The two bands of horseriders, Humans and Vampires met, clashing, as the marketplace filled with dwarves on foot.

I backed away from the tent stall just as it was trampled by a brace of cattle. The air was filled with cursing in a dozen tongues, the lowing and bellowing of cattle. The pungent smells of blood and smoke filled my nostrils. A Horseman swung at me. I grabbed his arm and pulled him down as I dodged under his horse.

I didn't look back to see what happened to him. I leaped forward, almost running into a Dwarf lancer. He jabbed at me, but I slammed his lance into the ground and jerked it from his hands. I stopped suddenly as a horse screamed and reared, falling heavily on its side. A Vampire slid off, his long body almost liquid. For a second, our eyes met, he grinned at me, and then leaped away.

Behind him, the horse kicked futilely, screaming as its guts spilled out over the ground, its bile strong in the air.

I darted left around the horse, coming across three Dwarves. One of them stared at me and I scuttled quickly backward, getting on the other side of the dying horse. I leaped onto its shoulder for a second, balancing as it heaved and bucked, looking all about me.

There! Safety. A stone wall stood, backing a ruined trading stall. A small band huddled against it, staying out of the fight. I leaped off the horse and scrambled toward it. An arrow sped towards me but I dodged it, scuttling around a struggling group of horse riders.

I leaped over the impaled corpse of a Dwarf and suddenly it was calm.

The band at the wall faced me uncertainly. Behind me, the battle raged.

"Arrah," I said, hunching down and bobbing my head.

It was a mixed group. A Troll, a couple of Arukh, Hobgoblins, Goblins. They stared at me.

"Arrah," one of the Arukh grunted. They parted a little to let me enter.

Still hunched over, I scuttled forward until my back was against the wall. I breathed deeply several times, the smell of blood thick in my nostrils. The others' heads turned to inspect me briefly, and then looked back to the battle.

"Very bad," one of the other Arukh, a grizzled male without a nose, said. His lack of a nose gave his voice an odd sibilant quality as air blew in and out of the ragged scarholes above his mouth.

We watched the battle. At first, I found it hard to make any sense of things. Dwarves ran here and there, screaming and shouting, being ridden down by Vampires, or banding together in little clusters before dispersing to run screaming and waving their weapons, against Vampires on foot and riding horses. The Vampires and Humans riding horses swept back and forth across the market, fighting, parting, circling and fighting again.

On the edges of the fighting, we watched, almost relaxed, as if watching some game.

"Dwarves and Humans against Vampires," I said.

"Vampires aren't doing well, no ground forces," the grizzled Arukh commented.

"Too much open ground to fight on foot," the Troll said.

Which was true. Normally, with this much open ground the Vampires would have swept the Dwarves away. That was why Vampires liked long open boulevards. And why Dwarves liked to establish barricades and checkpoints, to keep from being overwhelmed by the Vampire cavalry. They liked heavy massed attacks.

"The Dwarves are doing all right," someone said.

We watched as a small band of Dwarves cut to pieces a handful of Vampires on foot, and further on, other Dwarves dragged Vampires from their mounts.

"It's the Horsemen," the Troll said.

He was right. As the sounds of battle ebbed and flowed, we could see that the Vampire riders were blunted by the Human riders, who stalled their charges, and harried them across the field. Vampires on horses held their own, but those who rode cattle found themselves caught between more maneuverable Horsemen and the Dwarves on foot. One after the other, they were dragged down.

"Men on horses," said a female Hobgoblin in amazement, "Mothers' wonders."

"I've heard of this," I said. There were grunts of agreement.

Rumours of Horsemen had been darting around for months, but the Horsemen had rarely been seen in most of the city. They'd kept to the fractious swamp that passed for the Human kingdom, or the Human villages that farmed further up the river. They were outside the City mostly, increasingly whispered of, seldom seen.

Still, I understood her awe. It was an amazing thing to see.

"They're not very good," the Troll commented. "There, you see? They use straps on the horses heads, and blankets on their backs."

Yes, now that it was pointed out, I could see.

"They sit rather than ride," I observed. "The Vampires are better."

I remembered the man I had pulled off the horse when the battle started. He'd fallen heavily, no style at all. A Vampire would have slipped off and then slipped on again without a wasted breath.

Several times we watched Vampires count coup on the Humans,

knocking them from their mounts. Men were much more ruthless, without style or grace they hacked at both Vampires and mounts.

A Horseman drove a lance straight into a horse's chest. The animal flipped over. The naked Vampire riding it, smoothly used it's momentum to catapult off, landing on two feet and taking a couple of languid steps. It ducked easily to avoid a Horseman's swing and sidestepped the thrashing hooves of its former mount.

It glanced almost regretfully at the dying horse and then turned, taking several casual steps. A Horseman rushed past it. The Vampire gracefully slipped away, slapping the horse's flank as it went. The Horseman fought for control of his mount.

The Vampire turned toward us, it's leathery, sun-scorched skin catching the light for a second, and began walking nonchalantly in our direction.

"It's Traditional," the Troll said, "City Vampires don't have hides like that."

"Shit," I said, "it's heading for us."

There was a sudden chatter of voices from our group at this unwelcome development.

Already, squads of Horseman had thundered past, checking us out. But none had confronted us. Our little band, obvious noncombatants, looked too formidable and too well secured to pick a fight with. If we were lucky, we might sit the battle out and walk away.

Unless there was a Vampire to draw attention to us.

"What do we do?" a Kobold asked in panic. "It's almost here."

The Vampire strolled across the battlefield as it might stroll across a meadow. It stepped around ruined corpses of people or animals once or twice, and dodged to avoid a blow, but apart from that it gave the fight no attention.

"It's dreaming," the Troll said.

"Keep it away," the grizzled Arukh said over a sudden clash of metal. The breeze carried a sudden whiff of carrion to us. "We must drive it off."

A Hobgoblin laughed bitterly. "You try to drive off a Traditional Vampire."

It was female, we could see as it approached us.

Our desperate debate ended as it stepped between our ranks and placed its back to the wall.

"So be it," someone said.

The battle did not come to us though. Instead, it raged back and forth across the market.

And suddenly, it was over.

The Vampires were gone, the market seemed empty, but for random fires and a scattering of corpses.

"Who won?" a Kobold asked, shattering the silence that the Vampire's arrival had brought.

"The Vampires are gone," a Hobgoblin said.

"Means nothing," the old Arukh grunted. "They'll come back with a stampede. Clear the place out. If the Dwarves took it, they can't hold it."

"A lot of dead Dwarves. More dead of them than Vampires or Men," the Troll said to himself. Had he counted the bodies? Trolls were peculiar like that.

The Dwarves, on foot, had gotten the worst of it. They'd been trampled by the Vampires and Horsemen alike.

"The men aren't good enough riders to handle a stampede," the old Arukh said.

"They're good enough to beat Vampires," I grunted. I was thinking furiously, trying to absorb this.

Humans had never counted for much. This was the Dwarves fight, at the gates of their Kingdom. In the wars of the Kingdoms, the Dwarves had always had to confront the speed and flexibility of the Vampires' beast riders. Now they'd found riders of their own.

"Vampires will need more ground troops to hold next time," the grizzled Arukh said, mirroring my thoughts. The scarred flaps where his nose should have been snorted, "can't run a stampede everywhere."

Next time? The balance of power in the City was shifting. Who knew how far or how hard?

A band of Dwarves came around the wall. They stopped, staring at us.

"What's this?" their leader said. He was middle aged and dressed in better armour than his fellows. I could see the glint of plate and mail. "We missed a blood drinker?"

The others wore goblin armour, weavings of fresh twigs and branches, covered with clay and fire hardened, rude and rough to the eye.

Goblin armour was heavy but very cheap. It seldom lasted out a battle, and might only protect against two or three good blows. But then again, if you were so poor a warrior as to take two or three good blows in a battle, odds were you wouldn't last the battle, no matter what the armour.

Their armour was cracked and broken. They looked tired and bloody, their clothing and weapons cheap and ill sorted. Outkingdom dwarves, I guessed, here seeking Totem membership.

The Vampire, surveying the battlefield, gave the Dwarf a cursory glance.

"We contemplate the flavour of evening," she said coldly.

"Oh," said the Dwarf, "is that what it is called? Hiding among the filth?"

"There is no hiding from the self," the Vampire replied, "and nothing else worth hiding from. Here I stand; it is as sufficient a place as any other."

"Ah," said the Dwarf, "perhaps you could stand over here, so that we can add a Traditional scalp to our pickings."

"As it is your desire," the Vampire answered, "it is incumbent upon you to follow it. My place is satisfactory to my wishes. I have no urge to move."

"Well enough then," the Dwarf said. Turning to his band, he ordered, "kill them all."

We held our weapons tight, crouching and waiting. Only the Vampire seemed unconcerned.

"No," one of the Dwarves said. He had the flattened accent of an outkingdom Dwarf; by the sound of it, probably from somewhere near the Goblin quarter.

The lead Dwarf turned glowering.

"What?"

"No," said the Dwarf. "What? Do we look stupid? That's a Traditional Vampire. There's a Troll. Those are Orc. There's Hobgoblins and Kobolds there. They're dangerous. Any of them is dangerous, and there's a flock of them standing there."

"Are you disobeying an order?" the leader asked dangerously.

Behind them, the other Dwarves shifted nervously.

The challenger stepped back a little, looking for support from his comrades. He didn't seem to find it.

"I'm asking you to consider your order," the other Dwarf said nervously, "we've just been through a battle. They're fresh."

"You wanted to join Snow Leopard totem."

"Totem don't mean nothing if you're dead," the other Dwarf replied, holding to a little scrap of defiance. Something that no Kingdom Dwarf would ever think.

I watched the others. They weren't itching for a fight, I could tell. But they wouldn't commit to defiance. Eventually, he'd bully them into it, because it was easier to scream and die than to say no. They would die, the strength was on our side.

The leader stared at the challenger. He was physically larger, and in better condition. His bronze armour was still pristine, the other Dwarf's Goblin armour was shattered in a dozen places. A quick fight, I decided. Not a good outcome.

"You will always be outkingdom," the leader snarled.

The other Dwarf shrugged eloquently. He'd picked his spot, now he was making his peace with death.

The leader looked over the others, trying to gauge their willingness to attack. He didn't seem to like what he saw.

"Fine," the leader said, "we'll hold them here and send for a clan party"

No, I thought. Not good.

I took a lance from a surprised Hobgoblin, and stepped forward, crouching submissively, holding the lance straight up, base against the ground.

"Honoured Sirs," I grunted, "excuse me."

The lead dwarf turned to face me.

"What?"

I drove the blunt end of the lance into his face. His eyes bulged. There were a series of cracks as his teeth shattered from his mouth and his jaw broke, his head arched back and his neck snapped.

I'd pulled the lance away and stepped back, squatting, grinding the now bloody base of the lance into the packed earth beneath my feet.

The Dwarves had backed up, holding weapons at ready, as if waiting for a charge.

Nothing happened.

"I guess you're the leader now," I said finally, to the Dwarf who'd challenged the leader. "Honoured Sir."

He looked from me back to the body, and then to the band behind me.

"Battle's over," I said. "You won. We didn't fight. We don't fight now. We just want to go. Nobody has to die. You win, we go away. You show strong, we retreat. Not come back."

He looked back at his band, chewing his lip nervously.

I stared at the dead Dwarf between us.

"Nice armour," I said.

He glanced at his leader's corpse.

"Yes."

"Very expensive."

"Yes."

"Too bad a corpse wears it."

That seemed to decide it, for him.

He took two steps and kicked the body, theatrically, for his troops. The corpse rolled.

He spat on it.

"Kingdom bastards," he said loudly for his troops, "call us out to die, while they sit safe with the totems."

This one had gone out to die with the rest of them, but it wasn't the time to mention it.

He looked at the assembled Dwarves. There were other Dwarves and

Human riders beyond them, moving back and forth. No one was paying attention.

"Battle's over," he said, "we take our rewards."

There was a mumble of agreement.

He turned to us.

"You there," he addressed my band, "this is our place. Go away, or we'll kill you too."

I bowed submissively and grinned.

"Honoured Sir," I answered.

"I had a dream," the Vampire announced. "I dreamt that I squatted, and dropped a large piece of shit. And then it began to speak to me."

"This was your dream?" I asked.

"Well, there was more to it," she said, "and there was subtext and symbolism, metaphor and layer of meaning. It merits annotation. You wouldn't understand, of course. But this thing I speak of, this was the part that pertains to you."

"Arrah," I said sourly. It was comparing me to the excrement of its dream, that was plain. "So what did it say to you?"

"It castigated me for creating it and then refusing to acknowledge it. I pointed out that it maintained its existence regardless of my wishes or attentions."

"It challenged me for my responsibility to it as creators owe to their creations. It posed interesting questions. What did it owe me, for giving it life? If this was not a welcome gift it enjoyed, what did I owe it for the injury of life? That we now both existed separately, was there a relationship between us? Should there even be one?"

"What did you conclude," I asked, "you and your shit?"

I was almost interested.

"There were many aspects," said the Vampire, "but one was that as the process of its existence had provided me with relief, I owed it a boon. It's creation had served my interests, if not its own, redress was needed."

This was her indirect way of telling me that she felt some sense of

obligation for the fact that I'd saved her life back there, whether I'd wanted to or not.

"I want to find a horse," I said. "I want to find a place I have seen from the water."

She stared at me.

"From water?"

"I travelled there by water. Now I want to go there by horse."

She nodded.

"You journey by halves, from land and sea. I like the metaphor. I will find you horses and accompany you."

She began to whistle, a keening high trill that went on and on. Eventually, a group of four horses appeared, a stallion and three mares. Watching Goblins murmured with awe at the Traditional's ability to call horses from nothingness.

I watched her caressing the stallion, noting their familiarity with one another. She moved among the mares, finally choosing one, she gestured to me to mount up.

We rode out. I tried to keep the river in sight, though it made poor riding. Too much brush and scrub, too uneven the ground, to ride quickly.

"You aren't City Rughk," the Vampire said. "You ride as if from the plains."

I shrugged.

"The plains," she said again, "but a long time ago. Perhaps you rode with the herds, perhaps born there."

"You are not southern," she probed, "speech is wrong."

"North," I replied uncomfortably.

She nodded.

"Up along the border forests," she said. "Rughk are made there when we meet the Goblin folk. The herds go out, the Rughk are born, the herds come back next year, and the year after. The Rughk are left behind sooner or later. No Rughk can stay with the herds. They live, some of them. Solitary and mad."

"Arukh live as best they can."

"There is a little bit of Troll speech in your accent."

"Is there?"

"You were a trapper in the northern border forest. You grew up near a Troll. You learned from the Troll."

"Dead Troll."

"Did you kill it?" she asked.

I hesitated.

"I kill Trolls," I said finally, defiantly.

Except I hadn't, not really. I remembered highfooting through the snow, wet with the cold, gasping, lungs burning, my trap failed and now they where hunting me, closing in to kill me and all I could do was flee, pulling myself through the deep snow as their long strides brought them to me. And then the sound of the ice breaking...

"I have it that Rughk destroy everything they touch," she said, snapping my attention back to her.

"Arrah," I replied, "this is true.

"Why does this matter?" I asked, irritated by her near prescience. She was too clever, she read too much. I would have to get away from her.

"You know big killers. Tigers and Bears and Trolls. You don't know about wolves on the plain."

I was stunned. All this, just to tell me I didn't know about wolves?

I hated vampires, I decided again.

"I have seen wolves," I grunted.

We rode in silence for a while.

"Why?"

"What?" I asked.

"Why did you come here?"

"Can't you tell, I thought your dreams told you everything," I sneered.

"I have asked," she said simply.

I grunted. We rode along in silence again.

She waited.

"There was a Troll," I said suddenly. "Sometimes I raided his traps,

when my own weren't enough. Sometimes he hunted me. He didn't hunt very well. Or maybe he didn't try very hard. He died."

The Vampire waited.

"I killed him," I said. Saying that, it made my chest tighten. As if it was true.

She looked at me.

"I did not kill him," I admitted. "He just died. Things die. Everything dies."

"New Trolls moved into the traplines. They wrecked my traps, burned my shelters, hunted me hard. They would have caught me, sooner or later."

I had tried so hard to kill them, so very hard, and it had ended with that desperate flight through the snow, death at my back, and that moment where I felt the ice cracking beneath my feet and knowing I was going to die. I bit my lip, I would not speak of it further.

"Aah," said the Vampire, as if she had read more than my words.

I refused to speak again.

No new pearls of wisdom came from her.

We found the place, I marked its location by the carrion crows and the second body. From horseback, it had the look of a secluded mud bay, quiet and out of the way of both travellers by land and sea. A good place to dump bodies.

From the vantage point of the horse, I scanned the bay, looking for signs of other bodies. Nothing fresh enough to warrant investigation.

There was no trail for the second body. Too much time had passed. There was a trail from Mira's body's location. I followed it, leading my horse.

The Vampire followed on horseback.

"Bad country for horses," the Vampire said, looking around.

"Arrah?" I looked up at her.

"Browsing country, trees and bushes. Not grazing country. Footing's treacherous for horses. This is a place for jumpers, like deer and elk, not horses."

I looked around. It wasn't too different from what I'd known on the

trapline. Then again, there hadn't been many horses in the traplines. Just deer and elk as she'd said.

"Good horse country," the Vampire pointed, "way over that direction."

Was she urging us to head over there? I ignored her.

Poor horse country just meant that whoever had dropped the bodies had wanted to wander off the beaten path.

I followed the horse trail as best I could, until it was joined by first another, then several other horses, as I knew it would.

The trail was lost. I got back on the horse and followed the path made by many horses.

The Vampire stared at me expectantly.

I sighed.

"Tell me about wolves," I said finally. It was there, she was waiting in that damned Vampire way, their allusion and metaphor, always talking about one thing and saying something else. I despised their maddening indirection.

The Vampire brightened, grinning, her two delicate fangs shining.

"I will tell you how wolves kill," she said.

"With tooth and claw," I told her.

She ignored me.

"You are from the forest lands, and so you learn the ways of great killers. Trolls, Tigers. Hide. Stalk. Ambush. The killing blow."

"Arrah."

"Wolves are different. On the plains, there is no place to hide, to stalk. Instead of the hunt, there is the chase. Where the tiger is the one, because a great one can hide where the many cannot, the wolf is many, because the small many can chase, where the great one will fail."

"Wolves aren't small," I said. I had seen wolves as big as Hobgoblins.

"By the eyes of those they kill, the wolves are small indeed."

I grunted.

"The wolf, it is not strong enough for the killing stroke. The way they kill is as the way they chase. It is long and drawn out. It is many bites, first to stop, then to bring down. They bite and they bite and they bite,

tearing away pieces, drawing blood and slicing the muscles, pulling out the guts.

"I have seen wolves take half a day, killing a cow. I have seen wolves eat their full, and still the cow clung to life, slow to die.

"What is this word the Goblins have... butcher. Wolves, they are butchers. Slow and sloppy killers, torturers of many cuts, but killers still."

"What?" I said, shocked.

Mira's body was still large in my mind. Butchery. Torture of many cuts. How did she know these things? Did she know? Why was she saying this to me?

"Why do you tell me this?" I asked. "What do you mean by this?"

She only grinned.

"I have fulfilled the obligation of my dream."

Her horse galloped away.

I pursued but my horse soon tired. She'd vanished.

The horse slowed to a walk, returning on its own to the grass fields that marked the entrance to Vampire Kingdoms.

Vampires, the Traditional Vampires that rode and drank from the beasts as they swept back and forth over the plains year after year, believed all existence was a dream of many dreamers, a labyrinth of hidden meanings and symbols that they existed in both waking and sleeping.

It made them damned irritating to talk to.

I made my way back to the Lodge, pulling my great knife, a bronze blade about two feet long, as I approached it. The building's massive bulk sat imposing before me, the high roof blotting out a piece of the sky.

The great doors stood open, tall enough for Trolls to walk through, a dark cavern yawned within. From its mouth came the heavy rhythmic sound of a drum beating.

Just outside the doors, three Arukh were cutting up the body of another. They snarled at me as I approached. I growled low, holding the knife to them. There wasn't enough left of the dead Arukh to guess who he was or how he'd died, not that it mattered to anyone but the victim and his

killers, and not very much to them. Soon they would go back to bickering over the choicest cuts and who would break the bones and suck the marrow.

I passed through the doorway, staying to the centre, snarling right and left as I did so. There was no one laying in wait. I paused, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness within. Down the centre of the long hall, a few dung fires burned, the smoke curling high and rising out through the roof shutters.

Arukh of all sorts roamed back and forth in the lodge, gambling, arguing, eating. Some sat by the cubholes that lined the sides of the lodge. A few pairs of hostile eyes fixed upon me. I strode forward, brandishing the knife, growling at whoevers' eyes met mine. One by one, they looked away.

At the other end of the lodge, the heavy drum beat, and Trolls stirred the stew pots. I made my way down, snarling as I went, weaving back and forth.

Two thirds of the way down, I approached a small crowd. Two Arukh were fighting with a third. I glanced at them as I walked past. The victim, a female about three quarters grown, was putting up a fight, screaming and clawing. The large heavy one grunted and cursed, trying to hold her down and spread her legs, while the thinner, older one darted back and forth, hitting her wherever he could.

They'd misjudged her, I thought. She was putting up too much of a fight to make it worthwhile, but now they were committed. They had to finish it. There was a chance they might kill her doing it. She might kill one of them, or injure one so that he would be easy for someone else to kill.

Fools.

The smell of Arukh blood was in the air.

She landed a lucky kick to the face of the smaller one, throwing him comically back on his ass. But this allowed the larger enough leverage to slam her head into the ground. For a moment, her body went spastic, her limbs thrashing uncoordinated, I could almost see her eyes lose focus. But then she clawed back, her movements regained their futile purpose. She struggled. Better for her if she did not.

I walked over to the Troll's tables. There were three of them today. Iron Pants, who was usually here, an old bull, and a young Troll, only recently in full growth. The bull was new, but there was a carefulness to him that showed he knew of Arukh. The young Troll had been around lately. He asked stupid questions. Only his size and strength kept him alive.

Iron Pants looked at me.

We called him Iron Pants, but actually, he wore bronze. Tarnished bronze plates covered the fronts and backs of his legs, and ran up to protect his lower torso, all held together and hanging by leather straps. He was the only Troll I'd ever seen that wore armour.

There were scratches and dents on his bronze where Arukh had tried their luck. An Arukh couldn't kill a Troll, but with luck, you might hurt it.

Nobody'd had luck with Iron Pants.

Apart from the armour he was unexceptional. All Trolls look alike. About ten feet tall, covered with thick hair, great feet and hands, huge exaggerated features, he stank of rancid meat.

He smacked rubbery lips when he saw me.

"Selk warriors come," he said. "They give me twelve pieces of gold for you. I give you three. I keep eight for you. The last is mine. When they tell me, you get the eight."

Behind us, the Arukh's shrieks tore the air. I flinched irritably. Kill her, I thought, or smash her head so she's quiet, and finish and go away. Their amateurishness, all their amateurishness, annoyed me.

Usually, on commissions, the Troll let go the money when you brought a head in, or after a period of time had passed.

"What happens if they don't tell you."

The Troll grinned, showing gigantic, tusklike fangs curling upwards from his jaw.

"I keep it all. See. They have no reason to withhold. They don't get it back."

"And if they decide to leave it with a Troll forever?"

"Then you talk to them," he laughed.

He turned away to haggle with another Arukh that had come with some

copper jewelry to trade. The Arukh hadn't bothered to wipe the blood off.

The old bull ladled me a bowl of thick sauce, with chunks of meat and bone swimming in it. There was a pungent heady odour to it.

I wandered back to watch the rape. It had gathered a crowd, watching from a safe distance. I found my way to a post, squatted with my back to it. There was someone, a male, blocking my view. I kicked him and he moved.

The big male had mounted her finally, I saw. They had her on her stomach, the smaller one sitting on her left shoulder, holding one arm and pushing her bloodied face into the dirt. Kicking, free arm flailing uselessly, she uttered a series of loud cries as the male thrust into her.

I chewed listlessly, observing the technique. Fools, I thought again. She was too much work. I doubted that they would take her many more times. They'd seek easier prey and more docile slaves.

The big male grunted and finished. She tried to scramble away as he pulled out of her, and the fight was on again. She was clearly exhausted, but she shrieked and clawed. Eventually, they had to stun her by clubbing her head several times. Finally, I thought.

The little one took his turn. The big male struck her once or twice, maliciously.

She grunted, still trying to struggle, offering keening screeches.

She certainly made a big deal of it, I thought. Some Arukh are like that. They get really upset by things like this. I shrugged. Arukh were mad, all of us were. I squatted and started to eat.

After the little male finished, the two of them got to their feet and staggered off together.

Another Arukh, a strong bull by the look, stepped forward and rolled her over. He cuffed her irritably as she shrieked. When he was done, another came forward. And then another.

I watched with mild curiosity, as I finished my bowl.

Like wolves, I thought, thinking about the Vampire's words. No killing blow. Just blow after blow, wearing her down, tearing her apart.

I returned to the Troll's pot to get more. The young Troll filled my bowl,

all the while staring at the rape with rapt fascination. I went back to my spot to watch the show.

She no longer resisted, having used up all her strength. She just lay there, whimpering, gasping for breath, as they took turns.

Once or twice, Arukh came to blows around her. Snarling and circling as if about to fight. But then one or the other would back down and wait as the other took her.

Like wolves, tearing the prey to pieces, devouring while it lived. What must it be like to be killed like that, I thought, to be butchered, to struggle and cling to life and still feel the knife coming down again and again. I pushed the thought from my mind. Where had it come from? Miri, I decided, I was thinking of Mira's death

I saw no signs of the violent blood hunger I'd witnessed on Mira's body; but then, I hadn't expected to. A madness of that sort was rare and distinctive. If it had been here, I would have already known about it.

Pity. It would have made things so much easier.

Finally, all who'd wanted her had taken her. She still laid where she was. Eyes unseeing. Whimpering like a dog.

As I said, for some reason, it seems to bother some of us, this kind of violation. That sort of Arukh, they did not live long.

Abruptly, she convulsed, her legs drawing together, she thrashed and kicked, pulling herself into a crouched ball. She rocked back and forth and began to keen.

Softly at first, she keened. Then her voice rose and fell with her sobbing. She put her hand between her legs and drew forth blood. Nervously she licked it off like a dog, rocking harder and harder, holding her legs. She howled.

It went on and on, rock back and forth howling, lick blood, howl some more. She sucked air, great gasping gulps, and let it out as shrieking, forlorn wails.

I finished my bowl and walked over to her.

She rocked back and forth, smearing her blood with spastic movements, barely noticing me.

I kicked her in the face.

The force of my blow knocked her over. Her limbs thrashed for balance, and for a second, she stopped shrieking. Before she could recover herself, I kicked her again, driving her forward.

She shrieked and tried to scramble away. I grinned and kicked her again, knocking her flat on her stomach. Ignoring her shrieks, I kept kicking her, as she scuttled away, until finally she crawled into a little cubhole. I crouched down to stare at her in there, seeing nothing but the shine of her eyes as she pressed herself up against the back of the shallow hole.

She whined softly.

I snarled at her and bobbed my head. As I crouched, I scraped my knuckles against the ground restlessly.

Nothing. Not even a whimper now. Just the shine of the eyes watching me.

Satisfied, I stood and walked away, passing near the pair of males who had raped her initially. They squatted lazily, regarding me.

"Arrah?" I grunted at them, questioning.

I bent down and punched the big male in the head, as hard as I could. He went flying.

The little one jumped for me. I caught him in mid leap, lifted him over my head, and slammed him into the ground. I jumped on his body, feeling ribs cracking. Smashing him with my fists a few times I picked him up again and cast him at the big male, who was just climbing to his feet, shaking his head to clear blood from his eye.

He grunted and struck when the small male blundered into him. Too late, I struck him again, grinning as I felt teeth loosen. I spun him around, punching a kidney and kicking the back of his knee. As he fell, I grabbed his head and slammed it into a pillar a few times.

He went limp.

I grinned widely, turning around and around. The other Arukh watched with mild interest.

"Arrah?" I challenged. None came.

I threw back my head and bellowed triumph.

The female watched me from her cubhole.

I grunted and walked away.

"Why did you do that?"

I jumped, turning. The young Troll had left his pots and followed me.

"Why did you do that?" he asked again.

"Stupid Troll," I hissed, bobbing my head. "Stupid questions."

Iron Pants came up behind the young Troll. I backed down, snarling, and crouched a dozen feet away.

"It meant nothing," Iron Pants said.

"But..."

"You think justice? Vengeance?" Iron Pants said. "You think she redressed a wrong? She watched like the others, she didn't care. Then she attacked the female first."

"Why?" the young Troll asked in confusion.

"She's Arukh. There is no why. Sudden attacks, sudden fights are common. Everything is calm, then for no reason, one Arukh jumps another. Sometimes they kill each other. I've seen it over and over."

Iron Pants drew the young Troll back with him.

"They're animals, full of random violence. Don't ever think you can trust them, don't ever think you're safe with them. They won't challenge you so long as they see strength, but provoke them, let them see weakness, let them see an opportunity..."

He glanced at me.

I stared back, eyes shining.

"Never trust an Arukh. Not any of them."

He pointed at me, and I cringed and hissed.

"Especially not that one."

"Arrah," I spat.

I thought about the second body. I wondered if she had anyone who might miss her. Nobody ever missed Arukh. I woke late in the day. Putting on the armlet, I wandered over to the Street of Joy.

The Street of Joy was actually a marketplace, or meeting place, located off the Goblin market, near several kingdoms, but controlled by none of them. In fact, it stood just within the Downriver, the slum quarters.

Flesh was sold there. Or more accurately, the use of flesh. All manner of people, male and female strutted here with darkened eyes and painted lips. I passed by sellers of all breeds, Humans, Dwarves, Selks, Hobgoblins, even a Giantess ambled through the throng swivelling her hips. Scattered through the market were hovels and buildings of every kind where buyers might enjoy the wares.

The street was thick with potential customers of all sorts, bargaining or making assignations. Here and there a street shaman patrolled, swaggering with magic.

I seldom visited the Street of Joy and never traded there. The people that dealt in their bodies tried to give nothing else. There was a flat madness here, cold and quick to violence that I found too familiar.

I passed down the street, making eye contact again and again. A few customers propositioned me. A ring of Goblins formed dancing around me, offering extravagant promises of bliss. I grinned, but otherwise ignored them. I reached the end and turned around.

My eyes met those of a blond prostitute. She was thin and hollow looking, even for a Human. Her gaze flicked to the armband I wore, reached for my eyes again, and was drawn back to the armband. I approached her.

"I do Orcs," she said. "A lot of girls won't. But I don't mind. They hurt you, but not too much, and they stop it when they finish. I don't mind, as long as they stop. They pay good."

She recited this dully, as if someone had taught it to her. She kept looking at the armband.

"Sometimes they don't even hurt me. I like that," she finished. She had scabs on her shoulders from toothmarks. Her body bore the traceries of old scars. She was empty inside. Like an Arukh.

"You do Iron Knife?" The knife would be sufficiently unusual that a Human might identify an Arukh by it.

"Who?"

So much for that trick, I thought.

She continued.

"I have a good mouth. I do that best." She snuck another glance at my

armband. She wore one herself, though not so heavy. The workmanship was similar.

"I don't want your body," I told her. "I want to know things."

"That costs, too," she mumbled.

I flicked a piece of copper at her. She failed to catch it and had to scrabble along the ground. A Goblin snatched it up and ran away, giggling. I held out another piece.

"Has anyone disappeared from here?" I asked.

"People disappear all the time," she said. "They just go away."

She took the copper from my hand.

"Disappear with no reason?" I said. "They should be there, they didn't go away, but they are just gone."

She shrugged.

"I don't know. Ask Copper Thoughts. He knows these things."

"Take me to Copper Thoughts."

I flicked her another piece of copper. She caught it this time.

Copper Thoughts was a street shaman. I stayed clear of street shamans. They had the reputation of being crazier than Arukh. In war they were deadly. In peace they were unpredictable and dangerous.

The girl lead me to the Shaman house in the Street of Joy. Magical symbols covered the building as we mounted the rough wooden steps and went inside. It was like the Troll's lodge, but smaller. Shaman's and sorcerers drank and gambled and conducted their business at great tables.

I followed the girl to a table near the centre where a handsome young human with long dark braided hair held court with prostitutes and fighters. He had souls in pouches at his belt. Copper Thoughts was everything I hated in a street shaman. He dressed in brown leathers and white fabrics with copper beads sewn into intricate designs. He was armed to the teeth. I counted three obvious knives, all bronze, and other bits of flamboyant useless armament. His magic potions rested ostentatiously in belts of pouches that crossed his chest.

I saw a jumped up fighter with a few magic tricks, growing lazy and working a few whores. I suppressed a sneer. Perhaps not a great magician, but still dangerous.

He too looked at my armband and then snorted from his nose pipe. He gasped softly. His pupils dilating. He threw back his head and looked at me. The nose pipe dangled from a cord on his neck, a complex device: an elaborately carved cylinder with a tall chute and four studs piercing it.

Indolently, he laid his pipe on the table and waved to me.

"What can I do for you, Unborn?"

I sat before him.

"Know anyone who has disappeared?" I asked.

He just laughed at me.

"Heard of any killings?"

His retinue stared. I glanced at them. Three women, obvious prostitutes, all young. A scarred older man, once heavy, now running to fat, a fighter who'd seen better days. The last was a younger, unblooded fighter who looked nervous and uncomfortable. He seemed familiar. Except for the young fighter, they all had the glazed vagueness of enchantments about them.

"There's always killings. Anyone in mind?" he answered.

I could tell other shamans were listening. One or two ambled closer.

"Bad killing. Eyes gouged out, tongue gone. Crotch torn open. Lots more knifework than needed for a kill. As if the knife keeps going after the heart stops."

That seemed to make his retinue nervous. The young fighter, the sharpest of them, pretended to look away, but watched me from the corner of his eye. I realized why he seemed familiar: he dressed like the horse riders. I'd seen a lot of that costume around lately.

Copper Thoughts nodded slowly.

"A month ago, we had one like that. Human girl, not one of mine. Tin Dreams." He indicated another street shaman who met our eyes and looked away. "Cut her throat in her crib. Just kept on cutting."

"Is that all?"

"A couple of weeks later, found another one. Human girl. This one was tied and gagged. Then started cutting. Looked like she wasn't allowed to die for a while. Both of them just like you said."

"Anything else?"

"Caught him. Dwarf tried a knife on a girl. She called, he ran. We all took him apart. No more problem."

"Tell me about the Dwarf."

"Nothing to tell. Not Dwarf City, a hanger on with the Worm Totem. No friends. Used to spend here, biding time till he could get in full."

"He used a big knife?"

"Real big, almost a sword."

"How long ago?"

"Took him down some days ago. A week."

I nodded.

"You have good knives?"

"The best."

"I need a new knife. I want an iron one this time. Sharp on both sides. Know a smith that does that?"

His eyes gave away nothing, but his voice went flat and deadly.

"Try the Trolls. Iron is expensive for an Orc."

"Yeah. Know any other Arukh with iron knives?"

He shook his head.

"Orc that rich ought to spend."

I pushed a handful of coppers towards him.

"You hear of any old bodies badly cut up? Anybody disappeared kind of strange?" I asked again, conspicuously fingering the armlet.

He looked around.

The other shamans were listening. He didn't dare say anything they would know to be untrue. He drew a knife and tried to be casual about playing with it. His fighters shifted uneasily. The knife spun on his fingertip.

I laid my hands on the table, just to show I had no blades in them. His pipe rested between us.

"I hear of bodies around here. Some of them pretty bad. Can't say if they are like the others or how many. Probably none. Heard of bodies, other places in the City. Vampire children, Half-Vampire, Goblin. Hard to say. You know how it goes."

He looked at me levelly. The knife abruptly stopped spinning on his fingertip.

"As for disappearing. People vanish all the time. Sometimes they show up again. Sometimes they don't. Even keeping their soul for them doesn't stop them going."

He made a move. Lightning with his knife. I grabbed the

nose-pipe to block it.

The source of a street shaman's power is his pipe.

The knife hovered inches from my face, it's blade scarring the fine ivory carvings of the heavy pipe.

We stared at each other, grinning. Empty violent madness, Arukh rage, burned from his human eyes. I showed him my own. Slowly he put the knife back in its sheath. He buckled it.

I let go of the pipe, laying it down gently.

The room was silent. A huge hand grabbed me by the head and yanked me to my feet.

"Don't struggle," a deep voice ordered. "Or I crush your skull."

It jerked me towards the door, frog marching me away.

"You should go now," Copper Thoughts called after me. "Go spend on a boy."

I twisted and tried to wrench my head from the terrible grip to stare at him.

His eyes darted to the blond that lead me here. She cringed.

"Or a girl." Copper Thoughts voice rang out behind me in laughter.

He took another snort of his pipe.

"Hey Unborn," he called after me, as my captor regained its grip and I was marched out, "I got magic for you. Smoke it. I make you brave. I make you strong. Fast. Smart. Take away pain. Whatever. But you'll be brave. I don't even take your soul for it. Unborn don't have one."

The burning sun stung my eyes outside. I twisted around trying to get a better look at what was holding me. It was a young Giant, barely mature, perhaps ten feet tall and not wedded.

"Easy," she said, "just relax and I'll let you go."

"Let me go now," I snarled.

I didn't like being around Giants. Trolls are big, some almost as tall as Giants. But Giants are massive, their proportions are all wrong. They look too close and too far away at the same time. You look at one part of a Giant, and then you follow that, and your mind just won't accept it. I've seen people around Giants overcome by the sheer vertigo that their presence carries.

"Wait," she said soothingly. "I won't hurt you, and you can't hurt me. Be patient."

A woman came out. Naked, I could see that she was a Selk: she had that smooth, shiny skinned look to her. She did not even have the little hair that Selk bore. It was all shaved. She wore jewelry and paints.

"I am Many Faces," she said.

I stared at her left breast. It winked at me. Each breast had a face in it, cunningly made from scars and tattoos and paints. There was a face on her belly, and another below. There were faces on her knees and buttocks, shoulders and elbows. Each face held a different expression, of cunning, insolence, wisdom, anger, boredom. As she moved, she posed, emphasising the turn or presentation of one face or another.

She was a powerful shaman. Each face represented magic. She could dance spells and miracles.

"I've heard of you," I grunted, trying to slip out from under the Giant.

"Easy," warned the Giant.

"Good," she said. "It is always good to know the names of the ones you come to insult. You've done well today, Copper Thoughts and Many Faces."

She waited for a reply, and turned a scornful shoulder to me. I let myself go limp. I could struggle against a giant, but not against a magician so powerful.

"I meant you no insult," I grunted, "mighty one. My business is with Copper Thoughts."

She shifted her weight. A face, carved into her belly, arched. Amusement.

"Perhaps we should wait for Forty Friends to come along, and you may

insult him too."

A dog howled. We all glanced in that direction.

"Easy," the Giant whispered to me as I struggled.

"Well, beast?" Many Faces said, shoulders back, her faces radiated sternness. "What have you to say for yourself? You come into my place of power, insulting me with your presence and your conduct. You touch Copper Thoughts' pipe. He will kill you for that, you must know."

"He can try," I said with more confidence than I felt. "I do not fear pipe magicians."

"You are a fool," she told me. "Copper Thoughts is a mighty shaman. Many fear him, few challenge, none succeed."

"An Arukh confronts you," a gravelly voice whispered. "You should not play with the foul things. Best kill it and be done."

Many Faces turned. An elbow flew out. The expression carved within was wide eyed. Startled.

It seemed to me that she did not so much move, as shift from pose to pose, carefully arranging the array of expressions carved in her body.

The Giant looked, her grip shifted and tightened. I could feel her unease. I tried to squeeze out of her hand. No luck, she held me harder, but I could see the visitor from the corner of my eye.

It was an Arukh, but such an Arukh. She stood a good three inches taller than I, who was already tall for an Arukh, and weighed three times as much. Her body was massive, her breasts hung to her huge greasy belly, her arms and thighs thick as trees. She wore fragments of mismatched armour, her body covered by livid scars.

One side of her face was caved in, the flesh smooth and unnatural. She wore a girdle of skulls, leather straps weaving in and out of eye sockets, and from each skull, a small leather bag dangled. She carried a staff that smoldered at one end.

Zerika the mighty. Zerika the fierce. Zerika the Arukh Shaman. Zerika, from whom the very earth trembles at her touch. Zerika who was named.

"Mighty Zerika," Many Faces bowed, presenting an obsequious shoulder. "You grace us with your presence."

The Giant shuffled nervously, still holding me. She too knew of Zerika.

"That's an Arukh," Zerika observed.

"Yes," Many Faces replied. "It has brought dishonour and insults to myself and to Copper Thoughts."

"Ah, you should kill it then. If you can. Best thing, with Arukh, kill them wherever you find them. If you can do it."

Many Faces just stared.

"Trouble with Arukh," Zerika said, "they take a lot of killing. Can't hurt an Arukh, can only kill it. But while you're busy killing it... who knows what might happen?"

"What might happen?"

"Lot of death in an Arukh. Sometimes it spreads around. Who knows where?"

Many Faces glanced at me.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" she addressed me bluntly. No more threats now. None of the courtliness of a magician. Left shoulder turned its frowning face to me, body bent forward. Stance of interrogation.

I grinned.

"Arukh have no names."

Zerika grunted. "Arukh are not worth naming," she said. "No matter how you kill them, there's always another."

"Someone killed a Mermaid," I told her, ignoring Zerika.

She stared at me. Slowly, awareness dawned, and with it, a new pose. Comprehension.

"You're the beast the Elders set on its trail?"

I said nothing.

"I have heard of this thing," she said.

I would have shrugged if I could.

"And you came here?" she asked. "You're a fool."

I grunted. Her head bowed, a face appeared, etched into the top of her skull. Thoughtful contemplation.

"Copper Thoughts will kill you," she said, "let him soil his hands."

The Giant tightened its grip, shoving down as it moved. I fell to my

knees as the Giant stepped over to be closer to Many Faces, both protecting her from me, and moving away from Zerika.

Many Faces turned. A bored visage poked at me from an elbow, pointedly ignoring me.

"Mighty Zerika," Many Faces asked, her hips arched, her body clicking into a new pose, "will you do me the honour of sharing my house?"

"Indeed," Zerika said, and walked up the steps. They creaked under her weight.

Many Faces turned her back to me. In the shaven smoothness of her skull, a stern face had been etched. Dismissal. But as she moved, a buttock lifted and held in pose for a second. Amusement.

"Be careful, beast," she called, "serve the Elders well and perhaps Copper Thoughts will forget about you."

I doubted it.

The Giant released me. I lurched forward, shifting about to face her.

She squatted down on her haunches so that we were at eye level with each other.

"You walked in," she said, "and I knew there would be trouble. The moment I saw you, I knew there would be trouble. Why is that? Is it because you are Arukh?"

She folded her arms in front of her, at once defensive, but not threatening. I stared at her. I was right, she was young, perhaps not quite full grown as Giants go.

I grunted.

"I offered no trouble. He tried to kill me."

"You touched the pipe."

"After."

She sighed.

"It wouldn't be wise to come back here."

The Giant pulled herself to her feet and in a few long steps, was back in the Shaman's house.

As I stepped away, I realized that my hands were shaking. Shamans. Crazier than Arukh, I thought.

The blond girl had followed us out and watched the whole confrontation. I growled at her. She belonged to Copper Thoughts. I didn't want to speak to her.

I walked until I could not see the Pipe House, and then sat down.

The girl came within a dozen paces and stopped, watching me.

I stared at her.

"When did they get the Dwarf?" I asked again.

Her brows knit in concentration.

"About ten, eleven days ago. After the second kill."

So that meant probably both bodies in the mud grass couldn't be laid to the Dwarf. And anyway, Copper Thoughts had said he'd used a different knife.

Two killers with different knives, making the same kinds of kills.

Unlikely.

They had killed a dwarf. I didn't doubt that. Maybe they even thought he was the killer. Lots of trouble, Copper Thoughts had said. That meant lots of hunting, lots of hunters.

The Dwarf had satisfied the hunters.

But why a Dwarf?

The Dwarf had been Worm Totem. Kobolds were Worm Totem, as the Dwarves saw them.

A thought came to me. Dwarves and Kobolds hated each other.

Whatever had impelled her to follow me had faded. She began to drift away. I got up and followed her.

"Were there a lot of Kobolds around the time the Dwarf got killed?" I asked her as we walked.

"Lots," she said. "For a whole week before the Dwarf got done they were all over the place. Didn't spend much. Didn't spend any on me."

Kobolds would blame a Dwarf quite naturally. But why would they be interested in a couple of dead human prostitutes?

Unless they'd done the killing, or sheltered the killer. The Kobold sheltered Arukh from time to time.

Or unless the killer had begun among them. Were there dead Kobolds,

horribly mutilated?

Either way, the trail seemed to lead to the Secret Kingdom.

I flipped her another copper and wandered off.

Copper Thoughts had lied to me, I could smell it in his words. His story didn't hold together. But about what? And why? Find the lies, I thought, and much might come clear.

Whoever it had been that killed the Mermaid, I didn't think she, or even the other woman in the reeds, had been the first victim. Perhaps the women on the Street of Joy were not the first. If they were indeed from the same knife.

But I wasn't much closer to knowing the killer. The sun was low in the sky. It would take time before I could ask questions of the Secret Kingdom.

I considered my next moves.

The Mermaid's body had been upriver near the Vampire Kingdom. And the killer had used a horse, which also suggested Vampire Kingdom.

It was time, I decided, to rest, and then try the Vampires and their Arukh Lodges.

The drums were silent, back at the Troll's lodge. No eating then. I entered swiftly, brandishing my knife, snarling.

The young female I had kicked was sitting outside the lodge gate. She leaped to her feet as I came close, and approached, cringing.

I growled deep in my throat at her, hunching forward. My head bobbed threateningly. She stopped, crouching in a submissive posture.

I spat, and took a wide detour around her, wary of traps. Sometimes one would divert attention while others pounced.

She followed after me. Twice I spun back to confront her, but she always retreated a safe distance, cowering as if I was driving her away. I didn't believe it for a second. The minute my back was turned, I knew she'd start edging closer.

Two Trolls watched, Iron Pants and the younger one.

Trolls watch. They watch us all the time. They watch us kill each other.

Sometimes they move, they act, but you could never tell when, or what they would do. Sometimes they spoke to us.

I grunted at them a few times, and then retreated to my hole, barring my door. It was almost pitch dark. I felt my way to my nest blankets.

I sat back against the wall, awash in my own scents, staring at the faint light that made it's way through gaps in the heavy planking.

Did I hear scratching at the door?

It went away.

I nodded off to a series of fitful catnaps.

After I had slept and rested for the balance of the day, I crawled out. I looked up. Outside the Lodge, I could see a hazy purple sky, the last rays of the setting sun, filtering through the roof shutters. The air inside the lodge was particularly heavy, moist and thick with the odours of Arukh and food.

I made my way to the Troll's pots.

"Looks like rain," Iron Pants commented.

"Close the shutters?"

"Probably won't last long enough for that," he grunted.

The young Troll strolled close, to listen to our conversation.

"Drums don't start until sundown," Iron Pants told me. "No food til then."

I grunted irritably.

"Wait for the drums," he said, and then turned back to his pots.

I glared at his back.

Nothing. He ignored me, continuing on with his business.

Finally, I turned back to the lodge, challenging staring eyes, snarling angrily.

There she was, crouching not a dozen feet away from me. I stared at her. She cringed but returned my gaze, refusing to drop her eyes.

"Go away," I growled.

I made low rumbling noises in the back of my throat.

She started to whine, lifting her left arm and waving it towards me. She

scuttled a few paces closer to me.

I hunched forward, growling fiercely, and took two steps off to the left.

"Arrah," she whimpered softly, moving forward another couple of feet, crouching and cringing.

I had to shift my body to face her as she approached. I moved to the left again, and she followed, approaching more closely.

"Arrah!" I snarled, making warning motions and barring my teeth.

"Arrah," she grunted, and approached again.

I leaped.

She crouched down into a defensive posture, but instead of coming straight at her, I swept along to her side, glancing quickly around to see if anyone else was attacking.

I kicked her in the ribs, knocking her onto her side. Snarling, I pulled at her hair, trying to lift her face out. Screeching, she pushed at me, trying to crawl away as I punched and kicked her.

"No slaves," I snarled. "Go away. Don't want slave."

She managed to bolt a few feet away from me, rolling across the gravel, and coming up in a posture that was both defensive and subservient. Blood was leaking from a cut just above her eye. She threw her head a little to clear it.

She mewled pitifully.

"Don't want you," I spat. "Get away. Stay away. Don't want a slave. Don't want you."

I rushed her. She fell over herself retreating.

She whimpered and held out her left arm again.

I rocked from side to side.

She uttered a low moan.

I rushed again. Again, she retreated.

We stared at each other. Finally, she dropped her eyes and backed away and sat heavily near the Troll pots, crying.

"The little one offered itself as a servant to the big one," Iron Pants said. I turned around, angry that they'd witnessed that, angry that they had

watched. It felt wrong. No one should watch. He was speaking to the young one. "She refused."

"But why the violence?"

Iron Pants shrugged.

"It's all they know."

"The little one was the same she'd beaten the other day?"

"Yes."

The female was listening, wide eyed, all her attention on them.

"Why would she want to serve one who'd beaten her?"

"The big one beat her masters too. That means that she's very powerful. More powerful than her old masters. Makes her a good choice for a master. These creatures, all they understand is power."

I was about to growl something unfriendly to the Trolls, when, all of a sudden, the female let out an earsplitting howl. The Trolls jumped.

We stared. The female howled and howled, filling the lodge with her cries.

I stared at her for a second, and then showed my heel. I had business elsewhere.

The city was agitated. Towering Giants and Trolls strode through the streets, massive and purposeful. Around them, hairy Dwarves and smooth Humans milled, a hodgepodge of armours and weapons. Tiny, bright-eyed Goblins scurried here and there, furtive and cautious.

"War is coming," was the whispered refrain. I watched a train of Goblins laden with grain and vegetables make their way back to their nests. The markets buzzed with suppressed energy. War was coming. Everyone was buying in anticipation of conflict.

Checkpoints were everywhere, manned by groups and races of all descriptions. This far south, the checkpoints and barriers were motley constructions of neighbourhood associations, hoping to preserve a measure of local peace.

Others, Hobgoblin and Dwarf had the disciplined feel of Kingdoms extending their reach, trying to find and hold defensible lines.

Some let me pass. Others I avoided. I kept to smaller streets and alleys, moving furtively and avoiding armed groups.

Armed bands of various races moved back and forth. I saw a trio of Horsemen studiously ignoring a brace of Vampires on the other side of a narrow street. Riding past each other close enough to touch, but refusing to acknowledge each other's existence. Other bands sat or marched warily, ready for trouble. Sometimes I had to double back several blocks as my routes were blocked by checkpoints or fortifications.

Elsewhere, there was the sound of hammering as makeshift buildings were fortified, or were abandoned and torn apart. Families sought safer locations with their belongings on their backs.

I stopped at a human meatseller, and bought some ripe liver at an outrageous price. I squatted down a little way from him to eat.

"War is coming," the meatseller said. I looked up and then around. There wasn't anyone else close by who was listening. "Guess that's good for you people."

I grunted, bolting down strips of rancid meat.

"Going to be a bad one," he said, wringing his hands nervously. He shuffled and arranged his meats.

You know what bothers me about Humans? Their teeth. They have these flat unformed faces, and in the middle of it, these flat teeth, more suited to a beast than anything that talks. You can almost see a Human as a person, and then their mouth opens and you see these strange square flat teeth that belong in a horse or a cow. And then they speak.

"Arrah?" I asked.

"The last war was pretty bad. But, you know, they just fell into it. No planning, no preparation, they were just fighting all of a sudden, like two Orcs in the street."

He stopped and asked nervously, "no offence intended."

I shrugged.

"This time," he said, "they're preparing for it. Saving and liquidating their wealth. Hiring. Fortifying. Last time, it was almost an accident. This time, they're looking for it. Mark my words. This war will be longer and bloodier than any we've seen."

He paused.

"You'll get rich, though. Lot of Arukh will be hired to fight. The rest of us, it's just misery."

That was interesting. He was right, there should be a lot of hiring. But there was almost nothing being done down at the Troll's lodge.

Dwarves hired from there, which meant that the Dwarves weren't hiring.

Or they were hiring someone else.

Horsemen?

I held that thought in my mind, probing it.

"Oh sure," he said, "I'll make money now. But when the war comes, where'll I get my meat? The Vampires will pull back the herds, and I'll be lucky to sell rats and dogs."

I shrugged. I figured he mostly sold rats and dogs now.

"More likely, I won't sell at all. I'll just be running for shelter like the rest of them while half the City burns."

He shook his head, awash in self-pity.

"Bad business, bad business. The Kingdoms don't care about ordinary people just trying to get by."

A pair of Humans stopped to haggle over the price of sweetmeats as I took my leave.

Up ahead there was a band of armed Humans. I headed down an alley.

Finally, I arrived at the Goblin market, the largest market in the city. I prowled the fringes, until, I came upon a group of wild Kobold cubs playing.

I pounced.

Shrieking, they scattered like leaves, but I caught one, bearing it down under my weight.

"Arrah," I growled, holding my hand over its mouth to silence it. "You want to live?"

Wide red eyes blinked rapidly. All around us, terrified Kobold children shrieked as their mothers and guardians rushed to them.

"You take a message to the Secret Kingdom," I told it. "Tell them…"

I thought. “Tell them…” I hesitated “tell them…the Rescuer wants to talk.”

I watched its eyes widen with something like recognition.

“Tell them.”

I let it go, and then took a comfortable place against the wall to wait. Attacking the children would have roused the Kobolds. But the message would make them think.

Several times heavy Morla appeared, lurching forward and shaking weapons. I grinned at them, but did nothing else. They withdrew.

Then a small white haired Gola, almost Gnome-like except for albino eyes and heavy dwarflike paws appeared. It stared for a moment.

“Two Human females, and a Dwarf, killed on the Street of Joy,” I said.

It gave no sign that it understood. It stared a moment more and then vanished.

I didn’t particularly worry about them. The Dwarves arranged themselves by Totems, the Kobolds by breeds. The Morla were the great warriors of the Secret Kingdom. Pale brutes with shaggy arms and legs. In my experience, they were good at killing Dwarves but not much else. But really, if you were a Kobold, that was what you wanted to kill the most. The Gola were a smaller, more talented breed, but not likely to be one of the leaders.

Finally, a delegation approached.

Three Morla, and a Gola appeared.

“Come with us,” the Gola said. They turned and walked away.

I followed them into a small building. At the back of the building a rough tunnel opened.

The Gola and a Morla went in. They stopped and gestured to me. I followed. The others came behind me. In darkness we crawled through several twists and turns.

They stopped. I waited patiently. A candle’s light flickered.

Another Gola and a male Sorel. Sorels looked like diminutive dwarves, but not so hairy. One of the Gola lead him by the hand. His eyes had been gouged out.

He took a seat in front of me.

"I speak," he said "I am three generations past when Goblin and Dwarf laid together."

"Arrah."

We both knew that Arukh had only one generation, born from Vampire and Goblin. Unlike the Kobold, we didn't reproduce.

"Rescuer?"

I made no reply.

"You are the one known as the Saviour of the children?"

"I have been called by this and by other names."

There was an Arukh in a Kobold story. A foolish, foolish tale, such as the Kobold are prone to tell each other, to pretend that the world is not such an awful place. I would play at being that Arukh.

He inclined his head.

"The Secret Kingdom extends greetings to Orc Nation," he said formally.

"The Arukh know no nation," I replied.

"So they say," he said, "but we are all children of the Mothers."

I had no wish to engage in political debates. I remained silent.

"Signs and portents are in the air," he said finally. "Powers seek advantage. New shapes are in the birthing."

"I don't care about the war," I said flatly.

He paused.

I let the silence drag on.

"You have called us, and we have come," he said eventually, with a careful lack of irritation. Behind me I could hear the Morla shuffling.

"Two women were killed on the Street of Joy?"

"Many die."

"Two women were killed on the Street of Joy. Bad killing. Eyes gouged," Copper Thoughts hadn't confirmed this, but I guessed, "tongues drawn, sex torn open, many many wounds."

The Morla nodded.

The Sorel, not seeing this, said merely, "go on."

"A Dwarf is killed, a member of the Worm Totem."

He nodded. “We know of this. Two Human women were killed in the Street of Joy. Very bad killings. A Dwarf is killed, Bear totem. No more killings.”

He was doing little more than giving my words back to me. I held my irritation.

“What is the interest of Secret Kingdom?” I asked.

“What is the interest of Orc Nation?”

I snarled. Politics irritated me. There was no Orc Nation, it was just another Kobold fantasy. We were not a nation, we could not make a nation.

“You have asked us questions,” the Sorel said equitably, “we are not to have the same rights?”

I stared blankly.

“A Mermaid was killed,” I said. “Very bad killing. Same kind of killing as the street of Joy. Maybe same killer.”

“Selk?”

“They hire Arukh to find and kill.”

He nodded, satisfied.

“Killing is done. Killing is over.”

“Humans killed on the Street of Joy. Why was the Secret Kingdom interested?”

“The killings didn’t start with the Street of Joy,” the Sorel said.

Finally.

“Arrah?”

“Month’s ago, near the gates of Dwarf Kingdom, we find a Kobold body, female, Gola, cut up like you said. A little later, another Gola. Then a Sorel. A Leyta. A Morla. A Leyta. Fourteen bodies in all.” A flickering of fingers, hand, hand, hand without thumb.

I sucked in a breath. So many. I hadn’t expected so many. For a second, I wondered that so many had been killed. But then, Dwarves cared little for Kobolds, and no one else took notice of them. Only the Kobolds themselves would be concerned.

“All the bodies,” I asked, “found near Dwarf Kingdom?”

"First two," he said. "One up near Vampire Kingdom. One near Goblin Market. The rest in Downriver."

"Tame or wild?"

His face wrinkled with disgust at the Dwarvish terms.

"First two were Dwarf slaves," he said. "The rest were free people."

"Arrah," I grunted. "What happened?"

"Shaman tells us, Devil hunts, like before."

He bowed in acknowledgement. "Rescuer kill Devil for us then. This is new Devil. Dwarf Devil. We are stronger now, though. Kill Devil ourselves."

"How did you know it's a Dwarf Devil?" I asked.

"Dwarf found and killed."

"You knew it was a Dwarf Devil before it was found?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"How?"

"Dwarves do blinding," he said simply, "it is their way." His fingers waved vaguely towards his own ruined eye sockets. "Dwarves rape our people. Dwarves kill our people. Dwarves steal our children and enslave our people. Rescuer knows this."

There was suspicion in that last part.

"Dwarf Devil," he said simply. "We hunt devil, guard our people. Killing stop. Devils don't go away. We wait. Human dies, sign of Devil? We search. Another Human dies. Hunt Devil.

"Dwarf found, hunted and killed. Devil dead. Killings stop."

"You sure that Dwarf is the Devil?" I asked.

"All Dwarves are devils. Snow Leopard Totem pays blood price for all fourteen, no denial."

Snow Leopard?

"You said the Dwarf was Bear Totem?"

"Snow Leopard's paid the blood price. They have a war to fight. They don't want to anger the Secret Kingdom. They buy peace for the Bears."

"Aah," I replied. I was silent for a moment, absorbing this information.

"The Humans who died?" I asked. "Who were they with?"

"They belonged to Pearl Eyes, a human Shaman. Strong fighter. He owned several girls on the street.

"The Devil, in killing his females, weakened his magic. He was killed."

"By the Devil?"

"By Copper Thoughts, another Shaman, in fair combat. He took Pearl Eyes' women."

"Copper Thoughts," I repeated.

Interesting.

"Copper Thoughts is a mighty shaman, a great hero," the Sorel said. "His magic found out the Devil."

Interesting.

"How long ago was the Devil killed?"

"Eight, maybe ten days."

"No killings since then? No bodies found?"

"The Devil was killed. No new Devils since then." He smiled.

"Any females go missing since then?"

He shrugged.

"No bodies turn up. Devil is dead."

I grunted thoughtfully.

"I would like to speak to some of the Kobold who found and examined the bodies."

"The Devil is dead."

"The Rescuer asks this favour."

The Sorel made a humming noise. "They are above and below. Tchak and Khagut will take you."

I bowed in thanks. There was a slow pause as we nodded to each other.

"What will Secret Kingdom do when the war comes?" I asked, forcing my voice to be casual.

"We will wait," he said, his voice rising with fanaticism, "let the powers bleed each other. When one is fallen and the other weak, then Secret Kingdom will rise, then Orc Nation will wake and know itself. The Mothers will bless us. Then we will destroy the oppressors."

"Arrah," I said noncommittally. "I thank you."

He bowed.

"It is a pleasure to hear the Voice of Orc Nation."

I winced.

Fanatics.

I spent the rest of the night going among the Kobolds, accompanied by a clutch of Morla, tracking down and speaking to those who'd found the bodies.

Each step on the trail seemed to lead to more bodies, I thought sourly, walking along. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a furtive shape following me.

With the two Morla, I tracked down and spoke to several who'd seen the bodies. I wanted to confirm as best I could that the killings were the same.

"What is your name?" I asked a frightened female.

She refused to speak, staring with wide eyes.

"You look second generation," I offered.

"First."

"Strong blood," I nodded. "You can choose then. What breed do you choose? Nela or Morla?"

"Nela," she said. A large breed, smaller than the Morla, but skilled artisans.

"Arrah," I said, "the Nela are clever. They will be glad to have you. What is your art…wicker…oils…clay?"

"Clay."

"Do you have any?"

With trembling fingers she handed me a clay cup. I turned it over and over, feeling it in my hands. It looked and felt like a cup.

"It is a fine cup," I said, "a very fine cup. You are very skilled."

As I handed the cup to the Morla to examine, I finally coaxed, if not a smile, then a little less than fear out of her.

The Kobolds that I met were terrified of me, and reluctant to speak. It was a tedious exercise coaxing words from them.

"You found a body," I said, "Devil's work."

Wary fear crept into her eyes.

"The Devil is dead."

"Yes," I said, "but I hunt the trail of a Devil. Maybe it's the same Devil. If it is, I am happy, because it is dead, and I don't have to hunt. I go away. If it isn't the same, I have to hunt elsewhere. I go away."

Both options seemed to take me away from her. I could see her calculating.

"Tell me about the body?"

She squinted, puzzled. A dead body had nothing to do with devils. I repeated the request and waited.

"Nela body," she said, "Dakra."

That was a good Dwarvish name.

"First generation?"

"Yes."

I nodded and waited.

"I didn't know her well. She was a branch weaver."

It was a Dwarvish skill, making useful things from tree branches. She'd been an escaped slave, then.

"It was around dusk. I found her outside in an alley."

"Not underground?"

"No bodies ever found underground," Tchak, one of my Morla guides said suddenly.

"Any entrances to the Kingdom, near that alley?"

"No."

"Much blood?"

"Yes."

"Pools of blood, enough to set your fingers in, ground so thick with blood it was like mud."

"No. Just splashes."

Killed elsewhere then, dropped there.

"What did the body look like?"

She shuddered visibly.

"Eyes," she said, "eyes were gone. Mouth cut, like a big smile."

She indicated along her cheeks.

"Tongue cut out?" I asked.

She shuddered again and shook her head. She didn't know.

"Many wounds. Many many, on body, on arms, on hands."

She held up her hands, palms outward.

Defensive wounds on arms, trying to protect herself.

"Between her legs...her legs..." she started to heave, gulping air. She rocked back and forth, moaning.

"Between her legs. Between her legs. Red..."

The Morla began to grunt behind me, reacting to her obvious distress, but uncertain what to do about it.

"It's all right," I said quickly, conscious of the Morla behind me. They were fighters, upset, they would attack something.

That was how it went, only partially helpful. Everyone spoke of the eyes gouged out, a few had noted tongues removed. They all noted the red ruins of the sex, and several emphasized many stab wounds. None had made any effort to check the width or depth of the wounds, and could offer no guesses as to the kind of knife. Two felt that it was a small knife used, but could not say why.

If all the killings were the same, then the killer couldn't have been the Dwarf they'd killed. The Mermaid, and at least one other had died afterwards.

If Snow Leopard Totem paid the blood price, I decided, it was because they wanted to keep the Secret Nation out of this war. I could not imagine the Dwarves condescending to acknowledge guilt or pay for crimes.

For the Dwarves it would be simple. Pay the blood price, defuse their anger, persuade them to sit out the war.

Perhaps the killer was another Dwarf? I tried the thought on.

It made a degree of sense. Dwarves practiced ritual blinding and they hated Kobolds. I could see a maddened Dwarf preying upon them.

I didn't see the taste of madness that infused the relationships of Dwarves and Kobolds extending itself to Humans, or Selk, or Mermaids.

Besides, I didn't think that a Dwarf had the reach for what I'd seen on the Mermaid's body.

Perhaps a Dwarf then? Likely not.

I turned matters over in my mind. The Morla were growing irritable, as I chased name after name. I wanted to try and see if anyone had seen or heard of anything before Kobolds disappeared and bodies turned up.

Copper Thoughts had lied to me about the Totem of the Dwarf that had been killed. According to the Kobolds, he was connected, however distantly, to both the killings and the killer.

Eventually, they left me back at the Goblin market near where I had found the children.

Dawn was coming. I realized that I was tired.

I felt a curious sense of frustration. Before, everything had been so simple. A mad Arukh, easy to find and kill.

Now...

Now, perhaps a mad Arukh, but if so, a very clever one to have killed so often.

Good and bad. Mad Arukh were common as leaves. Clever ones, not so much. But clever ones were dangerous.

Who?

Not one of the Arukh the Kobold sheltered, they would have been watched two closely. Not even the Kobold were such fools. By simple elimination, any Arukh that dwelled among them that could have had the opportunity to take fourteen would have been identified.

An outside Arukh then? One with the lodges, or wild.

But then, why pursue Kobolds? And why move on as he had?

Perhaps a Dwarf? I returned to the thought again. Even the one that had been killed? But the killings hadn't stopped, so it had to be another Dwarf or even more than one Dwarf.

Two Dwarves? Maybe more? The vampire had talked of wolves. Perhaps the killer was a pack of Arukh, a band of them. Or a band of something else. Dwarves maybe. Or Vampires. Even humans.

It didn't feel right to me.

No, it was a solitary killing. All the cuts from a single knife so far as I could tell.

Nevertheless, I slipped the thought away into the back of my mind, just in case.

Perhaps a Kobold? A big Morla or Nela might have been able to do it.

I discounted that. They were too well known to each other, too bound up in each other. A killer would have betrayed himself.

A stranger, I decided. It had to be a stranger to the Kobolds.

Perhaps a magician?

I wanted to know about Copper Thoughts, I decided.

Something hit me from behind, hard. The laminated wooden plate I wore under my cloak cracked. I went flying.

"Monster," a deep voice rumbled.

I rolled and came up fast. A shape appeared in front of me. I slashed and moved past it. It caught me. I grunted and tore at it, trying to stab as it held my arm.

Ublul.

Another was on me. They were slow, and not as strong as I was. I twisted out of their grip, but then another appeared. I stabbed at him, but he blocked it with his arm. And they were on top of me again.

I yowled with rage.

The big one—I knew his face, he had been one of the guards who had taken me to see the Mermaid's corpse, Slal—swung at me with a heavy club. I ducked out of the way, but that drove me near another. I slashed at him, but he just stepped back. Meanwhile, another came at me, as I turned, the one I'd slashed at as I rolled forward.

I was bleeding from my forearm. When had that happened?

"Arrah," I snarled, backing towards a wall.

"Arrah," there came a howl. The young female hurled herself at the rear of the Ublul.

They drove her back, and arranged themselves into a defensive formation. Slal faced me.

I watched them. They were slow and heavy, good defensive fighters. I wouldn't do well to attack them, but I had no fear. They'd lost their surprise and I was fast and mean enough to cut them up if they moved away from a defensive posture. There was nothing we could really do now, but spit at each other.

"You spoke to the Mermaids," he accused me. "You went and you spoke to them. Did you think we would not learn of it?"

"What of it?" I gulped air, my heart pounding against my ribs.

"Don't do it again."

"This is what you've come for?" I asked. "To tell me not to speak to Mermaids?"

"You are a monster, an abomination," he said. "They are holy. You profane them with your attendance."

"They didn't seem to mind," I tried to snarl, but the words came out flat.

"It is forbidden."

"Is that your word, or the Elders?"

"We protect," he replied. "The Elders have given us this mission."

"You did well protecting Mira," I said sarcastically.

He blinked. A film slipped over his eyes for a second, and his placid expression shifted unreadably.

I tensed for the next attack.

"We failed. We will not fail again."

"I do not threaten the Mermaids."

"An Arash killed. The Arash are forbidden."

"Who saw the Arash kill?" I snapped, unconsciously mimicking his lisping pronunciation.

"We saw the body."

"Who saw the Arash?" I snarled. "Who saw the Arash kill?"

"We saw you visit the Mermaids."

"Yes," I growled, "but who saw the Arash kill? Surely the Arash are so different they are easy to spot? When did this other Arash come? How did he arrive?"

"We don't know. That is why the Elders have called upon you."

"You never saw the Arash kill?" I insisted.

"No."

"Then you don't know it's an Arash?"

"We saw the body."

"A Selk could have done it. You never saw an Arash."

I watched their reactions. Confusion. Doubt. Anger.

I didn't seriously believe a Selk had done it. It had started before it came to the Selk. I just wanted to make them doubt, to weaken them against each other.

"Watch your people," I told the big Ublul. "Tell the Elders: I have learned that this thing likes to hunt. It does not like to stop. It may take more victims."

"Why do you say this?"

"It has hunted before, among Kobolds and Humans. Now it has a taste for Selk. Watch all your people, not just the Mermaids, and leave me alone. I will find it and kill it for you."

"Tell us."

I laughed.

"I'll tell the Elders."

"Do not see the Mermaids again. Do not speak to them."

He hesitated for an instant, something softer appeared in him.

"You and your kind, you are abominations. They are holy people. It's not right. You will poison them just by being there."

I bobbed my head and looked away.

"Arrah," I grunted.

Together, they lumbered off, heading back towards the river. They left a trail of blood behind.

I held my wounded arm and watched them. They moved together in good precision protecting each other. Very hard to attack.

The young female Arukh crouched a few dozen feet away, watching me.

I stared at her.

She stared back. She was bolder each time I saw her.

I sighed and heaved myself against the wall.

I advanced on her until I was close enough that she retreated. I stopped. She crouched warily, watching me.

"No slaves," I said. "I don't want you. I won't protect you. I will hurt you. It is what we are, we make things hurt."

Her eyes glittered.

Insane, I knew. Words meant nothing, she was full of her own kind of madness. It would kill her, sooner or later.

Madness kills us all.

I sighed.

"If you're going to follow me around," I told her, "go see the Gnomes. They'll pay you to watch me."

No reaction.

The noon sun beat down fiercely.

I'd made a rough bandage around my arm. It was just a scratch, and hadn't bled all that much.

I went looking for Shamans. I wanted to know about magic.

"Arukh," she said warily. Her eyes darted about nervously, but she gave no other sign of fear. Everyone fears the Arukh, that is the truth. But it is not good to show it to us.

She looked like a scrawny Human, but there were traces of Goblin sibilants in her voice, and her clothes had a Goblin cut to them.

"Changeling," I said. "Foundling child of the Mothers. Mothers love upon you."

She looked nervous. For a second her lips moved in Goblin greeting, and then thought better of it. The Mothers cursed the Arukh, and on the whole, we cursed them back.

For a briefer second again, her lips moved in Arukh greeting and stopped. Clever, I thought, to know such things. More clever, not to say them.

"I'm just a healer," she said finally. "I've never brought harm to an Arukh. I've never brought harm to anyone. I heal and help, even Arukh."

I ducked my head, bobbing up and down. She knew enough to be reassured. It's when we swing our heads side to side that it is to fear. Clever, I thought again, and brave. I liked her.

I laid a gold coin in front of her.

She stared at it, eyes wide.

"What do you want me to do for that?"

"I've heard that you have strong magic?"

"I'm just a healer. I heal. That's all."

"Arrah," I snapped irritably.

"I won't hurt anyone. I won't kill. Find someone else."

I was amused. She was terrified of me, but she held to her little bit of ground.

I growled deep and angry, to frighten her. It worked.

"What is this life worth to you? What is your own worth, that you risk my displeasure?"

"You threaten me," she said, trying to work up a semblance of anger. "You come into my place of power, and you threaten me? How dare you?"

"Arrah," I said, amused, "mighty one. Forgive me. I do not wish to arouse your wrath."

I bowed my head submissively, my lips pulled into a tight grin as I leered at her, watching from the corner of my eyes.

She seemed mollified. Or did she sense mockery?

"Take your gold and your harm and begone."

"Wait," I said. I pushed the coin toward her.

She stared at it hungrily, unwilling to throw it at me.

"The gold is not for harm, mighty one. It is a gift."

She glanced at me again, and then to the gold.

"What sort of gifts do Arukh make?" she asked, still nervous.

"It is a token of friendship, mighty one."

"Friendship?" she asked. "From who? Who seeks friendship?"

"This Arukh," I bowed, swinging my head and grinning.

She knew enough about Arukh to be frightened by the gesture.

Interesting.

"You've healed Arukh?"

"Burns, broken bones, the rotting sickness from wounds. You… They are bad creatures."

"Arrah," I said. Would Arukh come to a healer? I doubted it. But perhaps she'd encountered some through a battle commission… "Who did you serve in the war, Vampires or Dwarves?"

"I served the injured," she said stubbornly.

"Do you want the gold?" I asked.

"What is the price?"

"You know much magic?"

"Yes."

"You know magicians and sorcerers?"

"Some."

"Copper Thoughts?" I asked.

She nodded.

I waited.

"Strong Shaman. Very strong. Saw him fight in the last war. Killed three Arukh, fresh ones, right at the start of battle, one after the other. Walked away. No one would touch him."

"Where was this?" I asked.

"Over by two stones gate," she said. "Right at the start of war."

I had fought for the Dwarves, for a while. I hadn't come close to two stones gate, though.

"How does he fight?"

"Two long knives, slashes with the first, stabs with the second; guts with the first, one two, three."

"He's just a street shaman?"

"He has become much more powerful. He killed Pearl Eyes, who was very strong. He takes souls. He has many souls, his slaves work for him on the street of Joy."

I grunted.

"Every one he kills, makes him stronger. Every soul he takes, makes him

stronger. He has very strong magic."

"What else?"

"They say he made the Horsemen. He took horse souls and twisted them, so Humans could ride. I do not know if this is true," she said.

I didn't believe it, a magician powerful enough to twist horses.

No.

"Regardless," she continued, "he stands high with the Horsemen. Therefore he is mighty in the Human Kingdom. Some say he owns the soul of the King's son."

"He is very mighty. Mighty like Forty Friends and Many Faces. He has the power to make war, to steal souls, to kill any he wishes."

"How do I protect myself from his magic?"

The Healer laughed bitterly.

"Ask me how to overcome Forty Friends?"

We glanced nervously at a pair of squabbling ravens. They seemed to stare at us for a second, and then went back to their dispute.

"It is lucky that you are Arukh," she said. "You have no soul to steal. He can only kill you."

I digested this fact.

"How will he do it?" I asked.

"Probably," the Shaman speculated, "he will send his slaves, at first. By this time, he probably has half the Human Kingdom hanging from his belt. If that doesn't work, he will come himself."

"Would he send madness?" I asked.

The shaman stared at me.

"You're Arukh. What would be the point?"

"Could he?" I persisted.

She thought about it.

"It might be. Most Street Shamans are very limited. Powerful, but limited. They have a few tricks, but they use them mightily. Copper Thoughts has risen high, higher than his old tricks could take him. He must gain new magics to hold his power. Sending madness could be one."

"Arrah," I grunted.

"Can you protect me from madness?"

She shook her head.

A thought occurred to me.

"Cut out tongue, cut out eyes, cut out female parts, use the wound in place, stab many many times. What sort of magic is that?"

She took a few moments to absorb it. Another moment to realize I was asking and not threatening.

"Are the cuts before death or after?"

I shrugged. "What difference does it make."

"Different magics," she said, "I only know a little. Cut out eyes and tongue after the body is dead, that's a magic to protect from ghosts. Up in the north woods, Humans sew up the eyes and noses and mouths of their dead. A ghost without eyes or tongue can't see you, can't follow you, can't name you. Someone that does that, they're afraid of ghosts."

Considering what my killer had done, I thought he might well fear ghosts.

"And before death?"

"Fear magic. Dwarves are masters of fear magic. That is how they rule Kobolds. They pluck out eyes. It gives them power."

I thought about that. Mira's eyes... They hadn't been expertly done. Dwarves have special spoons for it, you can tell their work. This had just been a simple gouging. No finesse, just grubby passion.

Probably not Dwarves then.

But interesting.

"This thing about the many stabbings, about cutting the female part. It doesn't sound like magic. It sounds like butchery, like Arukh. Except maybe..."

"What else?"

"This could be death magic," she said hesitantly. "It is said that one can grow powerful with death magic. You kill with fear and pain, perhaps you get stronger."

"How?"

"I don't know about death magic," she said. "Perhaps it is like stealing

souls, or burning them for a fire. Death magic is used for casting powerful spells."

"Ever hear of an Arukh with magic?" I asked.

"Zerika," she shuddered. "But Zerika does fire magic."

"Fear magic?"

"No. No magic there. It is natural to fear Zerika."

I nodded.

"Copper Thoughts steals souls," I said quietly.

She stared at me.

"Copper Thoughts is very mighty now, he does mighty magics. How much magic would it take to bend horses to Humans? Or to defeat Vampires? Or to set a handful of Horsemen atop the Human kingdom?"

"What is this about?" she asked.

"You know Mermaids?" I asked.

"I've never seen one." She nodded though. "But I've heard of them. Holy children to the Selk. There is great magic in them, and no evil, unlike..."

Unlike the Arukh. No magic to us, but great evil. She didn't have to finish it.

"Someone killed a Mermaid," I told her.

Her eyes widened.

"This should not be done," I said intensely. "Perhaps it was Arukh, perhaps it was not. But I will find the one."

"If it is Copper Thoughts, then he will be mighty past reckoning," she whispered. "All the magic of a Mermaid, added to his own."

I nodded.

"You cannot kill him."

I shrugged, and looked out the door.

"I cannot help you," she said pushing back the coin to me, "even if I wanted to."

"Would you want to?"

"If I could, perhaps."

"But you cannot," I said. I grinned humourlessly showing her my fangs.

"Do you fear Copper Thoughts?"

"Yes."

"More than me?"

She nodded.

I chuckled and pushed the coin back.

"Keep the gold. If he is as powerful as you say, I'll have no use for it."

She stared at the coin and licked her lips.

"Are we done?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"What sort of magic do you do?"

She shrugged. "Healing magics, mostly Goblin and Human, a bit of Vampire, little bits of others. Herbal magics, potions. Sex magic of course."

Changeling.

"Of course."

Raised among Goblins.

"Are changelings barren?" I asked.

"I have six children alive."

"You are a mother," I bowed my head. "That is very potent."

"Two human, four Hobgoblin."

"Arukh are barren," I said. "They are born, they die. There is nothing else."

"Yes," she nodded gravely. "It is good."

Unspoken words hung between us.

"Ahh," I said finally, "Arrah, it was just a thought."

I rolled her words over in my mind, as I left her behind. Was this magic at work? Death magic? Fear magic? The Mermaids were holy creatures. What was their magic? Perhaps I needed to return.

"What does Arukh mean?"

I sat on the dock again. The Mermaids were gathered in the water around me. I wasn't sure which of them had asked.

"It is a word of the goblins. It means abomination. Abomination in the eyes of God."

"Which God?"

"All of them."

"The Elders call you Arash Is that the same thing?"

"We are the same in every tongue, to every race that knows us. For the Vampires, Rughk; for the Dwarves, Hagrik; for the humans, Orc."

I listened to them trying each pronunciation.

"Where do Orc come from?" the Mermaid asked, carefully enunciating the trade speech accents.

I thought about it.

"From Vampires and Goblins."

"But where?"

"Arrah," I said. "There are many stories. I have heard from Humans, that Arukh are hatched from eggs buried in cattle dung."

"Really?" they asked, eyes wide. "What sort of eggs?"

"Of this I do not know."

"Did you come from an egg in cattle dung?"

"I remember cattle dung, but no egg. Perhaps it is so long ago that I have forgotten."

Their eyes sparkled. I continued.

"There are other stories. Vampires say that Arukh are tumours from inside the body that swell up and eventually drop away. For this reason, they say we are not truly born, but rather shed," I told them.

"Once," one of them said excitedly, "a Goblin came and told us stories. She told us a story about Ara, the mother of Orcs."

"Would you like to hear it?" another asked.

"I've heard Goblin stories," I replied curtly. In the markets, you could hear the stories of any race for pieces of copper.

"Yes," another said excitedly, "tell the Goblin's story."

Suddenly there was a chorus of voices calling for the Goblin's story, like eager children.

A Mermaid swam forward, into the centre of them, cleared his throat

and began to speak.

"The Goblins say that the first being to exist was the Mother.

"For a long time, there was the Mother and nothing else. Finally, the Mother crouched and shit and shit and shit, and the land came forth, soft lands and hard lands, mountains and valleys. The land spread out around the mother. Then she pissed, and from her pee came the rivers and seas. She breathed out and made the sky, and farted, and made stars. From her spit came rain.

"She sat in her dark silent world and was happy. Then she felt a burning in her chest. It went on and on and finally she coughed and burped and out came the sun. She set it high in the sky where it would do no harm. Later, she burped again, and out came the moon. She felt much better.

"The light from the sun and the moon let the mother see the world she had made. She saw it was beautiful, but it was empty. After a time, she grew lonely.

"So she squatted down again, and from her loins came the plants and animals of all sorts. Came trees and grasses, came insects and flowers, fishes, and things that flew and crawl and ran.

"And for a time, she was happy again, as the things she had called from her womb spread across the world. Everything was thickest and most beautiful where she was, but life spread and spread, until it covered everything."

"This is not how the Elders tell us the world was made," a different Mermaid burst out to inform us.

"No," they agreed bravely, "the Elders stories are different."

"Which story is true, do you think?" the Mermaid asked me.

I thought about it and shrugged finally.

"There are many stories. Perhaps they are all true. It's a big world," I replied.

"What stories do Arash tell?"

"We have no stories."

"No stories?" a Mermaid asked incredulously.

"None."

They absorbed this.

"That's very sad. What do you do without stories?"

"We don't need them," I told her.

"Oh," she said, "I see."

But the way she said it meant she didn't understand at all.

It seemed to disturb them.

"We listen to Goblin stories," I said finally.

"Goblins tell good stories," one said. The one who'd been telling the Goblin tale cleared his throat loudly, slapping the water with his hands for attention.

They quieted and faced him.

"Then the Mother grew lonely again," he continued. "She thought upon her loneliness."

"I will make beings like myself, she thought to herself, to amuse me. And so she squatted again, and made the little Mother. She drew from her womb Clever Girl, and Burrowing Male, and Serving Male and Hunter Male. Finally she expelled from her womb Totzakl, the first hobgoblin.

"It was the end of the evening, and dawn rose as she birthed Totzakl. A fragment of the sun struck her eye, burning her, and so she made Totzakl badly, so that he was born with three testicles.

"For a time, there was peace. The Mother and her children lived happily in the world.

"The children went out, and discovered the many things in the world, and because they had a part of the Mother's fecundity in them, they laid with what they found, and made more life.

"Burrowing Male made a woman of snow, and cast his seed into it. The heat of the seed melted the snow even as it gave it life, and Dwarves were made.

"Serving Male found a birch tree with a knothole in it. He put his seed in there, and the giants were born.

"Hunter Male found his way onto the grasslands. He found a great beast there, and entranced by its size and power, he put his seed in it. From its womb came a she-child who suckled at the beast, and when it's milk gave

out, she suckled its blood. This was Suckling Child, who was the most beautiful of all the children.

"So were all the different beasts and peoples created.

"Now, days upon nights passed, and it came to be that the Totzakl was expelled from the Mother's nest one day, for farting the four winds. He wandered far until he came to the Suckling Child. He had never seen anything so beautiful, and so he laid with her.

"From the suckling child's womb came the Ara.

"'Ara,' the infant said, 'I am new born. Who will care for me?'

"The suckling child, though full grown, was but a child, and so she ran from it. For children cannot care for children.

"Ara, the infant, said to the great beast which was the Suckling Child's mother: 'Who will care for me?'

"'I have room only for one child at my teat,' the great beast said.

"The infant wandered through the world, seeking one who would care for it. It came upon the Totzakl, who had killed for the first time and was eating meat.

"'Will you care for me?' the infant cried.

"Totzakl said no. But the infant cried and cried. To distract it, Totzakl threw it some meat, and ran away with his prize. Although he did later overcome his selfishness and share it with his brothers and sisters and their mother, and so they had the feast of sharing.

"The infant ate the meat of spite, and wandered, knowing no other lesson than the eating of whatever beast she came across. No one had shown the Ara to eat plants or the many good things that the Mother had birthed.

"The Ara wandered in the darkness, and finally, the Ara came upon the Hunter Male.

"'What are you?' The Hunter Male asked.

"'Ara' the infant, that was no longer an infant said, 'I am hungry!'

"And she fell upon the hunter male.

"The Hunter Male called loudly for his brothers and sisters and together they drove the Ara off. Hurting it. But the Hunter Male was sore wounded by the Ara and the wounds would not heal.

"The Ara was wounded herself, she bled and howled and made much mischief all around. Where her blood fell, the earth was poisoned. She destroyed where she went, and her cries hurt all who listened.

"Finally, the Mother called her children and said, this must be ended. She looked at the things made by her children and she found it was not good.

"This world, once so empty, was now too crowded. Beings of every sort walked and fought with each other, and made more beings of every sort.

"'An end to it,' the Mother said, 'from this day forth, each being could only produce beings like itself.'

"All obeyed the Mother, except Totzakl and the Ara who laid together and made monsters of all sorts. From the union came common monsters, the long eared cats, the wolves and lions, the taloned birds. And special monsters, like the hungry fish that ate the sun.

"Finally, the Clever Girl said, 'If the Ara will not obey the Mother and cleave to its own self, then it shall issue forth no more.'

"The Clever Girl went to the Ara as it slept, and the Clever Girl took a sharp stick and smeared it with excrement, and pierced the Ara's womb.

"The Ara screamed and woke. But Clever Girl had already hidden, and watched from concealment.

"'Who has done this thing?' the Ara cried, bleeding from between its legs.

"All the great monsters that it had made came and gathered around it. The smelled the blood between it's legs, and they gave forth a wailing, for the womb of the Ara was poisoned, and no more progeny would issue forth.

"The Ara went to the great pool from which all streams flowed at that time, crying in pain, and waded in, so that the cold waters of the pool would sooth her injured part. The blood from her wound entered the pool, filling it.

"All the great monsters who had come to the pool with the Ara and drank from it were thus rendered sterile. Only the lesser monsters, afraid to come near, remained fecund.

"The monsters caught the Clever Girl, they brought her to the Ara.

"'You have done this to me?' the Ara cried, seizing her and holding her high to rend her limb from limb.

"But the Clever Girl wriggled from the Ara's grasp and fell into the pool. The Ara and the monsters tried to catch her again, but she was so slick with the blood of the Ara that was in the pool, that they could not lay a hand on her. She slipped past them and fled down a stream.

"But, because the Clever Girl had been bathed in the tainted blood of the Ara, she could no longer bear children. This is true to this day.

"The tainted blood of the Ara flowed down the stream with the clever girl, poisoning it. Every female that drank from the stream was thus poisoned, but the poison was so thinned by its travel in the stream that females would only bleed from time to time.

"This is why women bleed with the turning of the moon.

"The Ara came to the nest, its steps like thunder.

"Coming upon hunter male, the Ara attacked him, wounding him sore and unto death. The cries of the hunter male brought the other children of the mother, who pulled him from the clutches of the Ara.

"It came before the nest and shouted out to all who could hear, 'I am come to eat you up, each one of you.'

"Totzakl on hearing this became afraid and fled to the bottom of the nest.

"The other children gathered around the mother and asked 'What shall we do? What shall we do? Even now, the Ara digs at the nest.'

"Above them, they could hear the sounds of the Ara digging. They could hear its howls and threats."

"No," I whispered softly, but they did not hear. The story went on.

"Finally, the Mother spoke. 'The Ara knows no peace. The Ara brings ruin wherever it goes. We must put an end to the Ara, or the world shall be brought to ruin.'

"And with that, she sent the children out to fight the Ara. She sent Clever Girl and Nurse Girl, Burrowing Male, and Trapper Male, Fisher Male, even Hunter Male, wounded as he was, went. All the children of the Mother but one went forth to battle the Ara.

"Only the Totzakl remained behind, cowering in the bottom of the nest.

"The fight raged for a day and a night, and at the end of it, the Ara was unbowed. She called her surviving monsters to her to destroy the family.

"Hearing the Ara's call, the Mother called forth her lesser children and grandchildren to fight the Ara and her monsters.

"Giliohga, the progenitor of Humans came and fought the Ara. The Suckling Child and the beasts came from the meadows, but the child only watched as the beasts trampled the monsters, the fish and the Selk came from the sea to drown the monsters, the birds came from the trees and the sky, carrying the Gnomes on their backs, and harassed and blinded the monsters.

"Two more days did the battle go on, back and forth. Many times were the children injured by monsters, but always the Mother made them whole, to battle the Ara again. The earth shook under the Ara's fury, and the sun fell from the sky and set the earth to burning, but still the children fought on.

"Finally, the Ara was defeated. The children cut the body of the Ara to pieces, and scattered each piece, so that the Ara might never be again.

"The Ara was destroyed, but the Mother was very angry with Totzakl who had made the Ara and refused to care for it, and with the Suckling Child who had born it.

"She said to the Suckling Child, 'You shall be a child all your life, and no matter how old or how great, your beauty is gone and you shall suckle forever at your mother.'

"And that is how the Vampires came to be.

"To the Totzakl, she said, 'You have made much mischief and I am displeased. You made the Ara, but took no responsibility for it. You laid with the Ara against my wishes, and made monsters with it that troubled the land. Finally, when the Ara came, you hid and let others fight in your place.'

"'The Ara and the monsters are the fault of your recklessness and willfulness. You shall bring forth no more children.'

"With that she ordered her children to bind Totzakl. She drew forth a knife and cut his balls away, so that he would bring no more monsters.

"One ball, she gave to the Hunter Male, to heal him forever from the

poisonous wounds of the Ara. It did that, but it made him lustful too.

"One ball she gave to Giliohga, the progenitor of Humans, as a reward for his help. In this way, Humans came to share the seed of Totzakl with Goblins, so that when humans and goblins lay together, Totzakl's children, the Hobgoblins, come forth.

"The third ball of Totzakl, she threw into a pile of dung. Suckling Child saw where it was thrown, and hungry for her lover's juices, she stole it away, where she sucked all its juices out.

"Because the juices of Totzakl are in the Vampires, when they lay with Goblins, the Arash, wild children of Ara, child of Totzakl and the Suckling Child come forth."

They waited, watching me. I flushed, glancing from one to the other. What did they want me to say?

"It is a good story," I said, "you have told it well."

They'd told it very well. Startlingly well, by the cadences and pauses, the rhythm, you could almost identify the storyteller who'd told it to them. I could almost hear the sound of Goblin rasps reciting, behind their smooth voices.

"She said that Arukh is Goblin for unwanted," Cara told me. "They say it means abomination, but really, it means not wanted."

I nodded.

"Yes," I agreed, "it is."

Among other meanings.

"It is a sad story," Cara said, "about a child alone and unloved. Poor Ara."

"Yes," another said, "poor Ara."

"We have made a song about the Ara," Cara said. "We made it after we met you."

"Would you like to hear it?"

I was not sure that I did. But I nodded anyway.

They arranged themselves in the water, in some way that only made sense to each other.

Then a young female began to sing. At first, I listened for words, but I

found none. It was no language.

Instead, as I listened, it was the plaintive lonely keening of a small thing, lost and hungry and alone. It went on, shifting here and there, rising and falling, so that I could almost see in my mind, a small creature searching for safety, searching for shelter, for a mother.

The Ara.

The keening went on and on, I almost grew tired of it, but then it seemed to deepen and slowly, almost imperceptibly gather force. I focused on it, another mermaid, a male, had slowly added his voice to the song, following the notes so closely that they were impossible to distinguish. The plaintive call was still there, but now wrapped in a tissue of strength from the other voice.

Other voices, male and female added themselves. It became by turns, ravenous and then sensual, lonely and then angry. It gained strength and depth.

And still, in the centre of it, crying was the sound of a lost child, clearly heard.

The symphony rose, became violent and passionate. Triumph and lustful joy leaped as the song came into its strength, ignorant and reckless, but strong.

Then a cry of pain. The song became confused, angry and fretful, afraid and uncertain. The voices, still full of strength converged around the pain.

The song became dark, the exuberance, the treble of voices seemed to coalesce into something singular and fierce, a mad evil purpose united the voices, until I could hardly believe the sound came from many throats and not one demonic mouth.

The water splashed. I jumped a little. The song broke apart into a cacophony of noise, of angry grunts and howls and shouting. The Mermaids pounded the water, slapping it with their hands and their bodies, making it seem like a storm tossed sea, the elements at war. A battle.

One by one, the voices stopped. Sometimes fading away, sometimes

ceasing abruptly. The storm of splashing ebbed, and gave way, and finally went still.

And then there was only one voice left. The lonely, plaintive child voice, that had been there in the beginning. That had been at the heart of the song all the way through. Now lonelier and more pained than ever. The strength of the other voices had left it, and now it limped along, exhausted and alone.

It seemed to cough and stutter, it deepened for a moment, as if gathering its remaining strength together before going on. It began again, managing three sad notes, and stopped. Incomplete. Ended.

"Arrah," I grunted softly under my breath.

My chest felt full, like there was something inside trying to get out. My eyes were burning. I blinked again and again to clear them, but they still burned. I swung my head from side to side, looking for an enemy. But there was nothing but the Mermaids.

"We call it 'The Life of Ara,'" one of the Mermaids said. I couldn't tell which. "It's a very simple song, compared to others we have made. We made it for you."

I pulled my legs up from the dock, and scuttled a few feet back. I turned around and around, seeking hostile shadows, needing to see enemy surrounding me. But there were none. Just the moonlight on an empty dock.

"It's not ready yet," another voice said, "the harmonies are off, and it's rough in many places. We want to work on it more before we sing for the Elders. Did you like it?"

"Arrah?" I said, trying to focus. I gulped air and crouched, trying to keep this thing inside me from getting out.

"Did you like it?" came again.

Through blurred vision I saw that a Mermaid had heaved itself up onto the end of the dock.

I took three rushing steps toward it, and stopped. I stepped back.

I swung my body back and forth, ranging it as I gulped air.

"Arrah," I grunted. "It is a song."

I took another step forward.

"The story you told..." I said urgently, "from the Goblin. It is a good story, but the Goblin left a part out..."

"The lesson of the story..."

I paused and then blurted it out, the words ringing the way I'd heard it from Goblin tellers.

"This is why whenever you find an Arukh, it must be destroyed!"

I turned and fled.

Behind me, a Mermaid called, "we know."

"Arrah!" I roared, running into the night.

They had destroyed me.

I stormed out of Selk domains, rage filling my limbs. My cloak flapped in the night as I pounded down the streets. Anything in my way, got out.

They knew. The knowledge was like bile rising in the back of my throat. They knew what I was.

"Arrah!" I roared at the night. A band of startled Goblins jumped and scattered, as I marched past them.

How dare they? I raged. How dare they know what Arukh was and still play with me? Liars, I thought. Damned liars. They'd known and still they'd talked and flirted. They'd pretended not to know, pretended. I was harmless.

"We're dangerous," I snarled at a startled Changeling. "We're very dangerous! Nothing can hurt us!"

I'd left the Selk domain far behind, I was in the heart of the Downriver now. I leaned against the side of a rough building.

Lying Mermaids. I hated them, I realized suddenly. I hated them passionately. They'd made a fool out of me.

"Song of Ara," I grunted. My eyes filled with water, I shook my head to clear them, blinking hard. How dare they? How dare they pretend that... noise was about Ara, about Arukh? Bastards. My fingers dug into the corner stone of the building. I held onto it, as if drowning, leaning against it.

A memory came unbidden. Digging into the nest. Desperate, angry,

fearful. Howling as I did. Tearing out woven branches, bark and leaves with main strength. Exhausting myself, lying panting, weak. And then catching my breath, digging, tearing into the nest more frantically each time. Digging and digging, finding the chambers and tunnels and tearing down, and through.

"Noise," I said aloud. I gulped air, my chest heaving. I pulled on the stone, expending my strength against it's unyielding mass, I swung back and forth against it. "Noise, noise, noise! Get out of my head!"

The stone gave way. I tore it from its foundation and lifted it over my head. Part of the wall collapsed beside me.

"Arrah!" I roared, and hurled it down, where it hit the ground with a satisfying crunch.

"By the totem!" a voice came.

I turned.

A Dwarf, one of the outkingdom, runty downriver Dwarves, scraggly beard, lean shortened frame, stood facing me with a club.

"Arrah," I snarled.

"Hagrik!" he said. Other Dwarves were piling out of the building behind him, carrying rough clubs and spears.

"It's mad," one of them said.

They looked scared.

Good.

Don't think about the nest. Eat their fear. Eat them.

I took a step towards them, growling.

"Get away, abomination," the first Dwarf yelled. He swung his club.

I caught it on the swing and jerked it out of his hands. He stumbled forward. I dropped the club to grab him, pulled him up until his face was close to mine. He went pale as my hot breath filled his face. I grinned, showing sharp heavy teeth.

I threw him back at his comrades.

"Dwarves," I snarled. "Think you're strong? Think you can hurt Arukh?"

I leaped and screamed. "Nothing can hurt Arukh! Nothing!"

They scattered like a flock of quail before me, scrambling and racing for the door to their house. The door slammed, leaving a few outside. I ignored them as they fled.

"Mighty Dwarves," I roared, pounding on the door, "come out and fight, come out, come out."

"Go away," muffled voices called inside. They were trapped inside. Like they'd been in the nest, trapped where they thought they were safe. I staggered back and threw up.

I hammered on the door a few times, cursing them, and then stumbled off, reeling under the weight of rage.

Copper Thoughts occurred to me suddenly. I headed for the Goblin market, and then the street of Joy.

I found myself before the Shaman's house.

Again, I pounded on the door.

"Copper Thoughts," I roared, "come out and fight. It's a good night to die."

"Go away beast," a feminine voice said.

I turned. Many Faces stood a few feet away from me. Her tame Giant stood behind her.

"Copper Thoughts..."

"Is not here," she finished for me.

"I want to fight him," I roared. "Now!"

"The choice of time and place," she said, "is the prerogative of shamans. Not beasts. Go now."

"You cannot tell an Arukh what to do."

"Take three steps towards me and a dozen arrows will fill you."

I snarled and rocked on my heels.

"You say that like it would save you," I growled.

The nest did not save them, the thought came unbidden. I pushed it away.

An expression flickered across her brow for a second. Fear? Good.

Then she frowned.

"What is wrong with you?"

I froze.

The nest…

"Nothing," I snarled. "Arrah. Nothing. Mermaid's talk, just talk. Mermaid's sing. Just noise."

"The Mermaids sang for you?" she seemed shocked.

Damned liars.

"Nothing wrong, nothing wrong. Arukh can't be hurt. Arukh can only be killed. That's all. Everyone fears Arukh."

She stared at me. I didn't like the look in her eye. It was too soft.

"The Mermaids never meant to hurt you," she said.

I froze. She was dead. I would tear her apart, no matter what.

She turned and walked away, stepping behind the Giant.

"Go home," she said.

I charged but stopped short of the Giant.

"Go home," the Giant said, not unkindly. "Whatever it is, it will fade. I will not fight you unless you make me. Go home."

I was not foolish enough to attack a Giant, though I found myself wishing it would come for me. I swore at it, but it only told me to go home again.

I was not angry with it anyway. I turned and stalked off. It was the stinking Mermaids, I hated.

I longed to fight them.

But there'd be no fight. Mermaids were no fighters. They were not made for it. They swam and danced in the water, sure, but pull them out onto land, they couldn't fight. They couldn't hurt you, make you feel pain. They'd only die. They'd cut to pieces so easy, screaming and crying all the while…

I thought of Mira's mutilated, butchered body.

She'd screamed and cried, cut to pieces, bleeding and dying while something laughed on top of her.

My gorge rose.

I didn't want to fight Mermaids, I decided suddenly. No sport, only butchery. It would not slake my rage. They couldn't struggle enough. I

wanted them to struggle. To fight. To make me feel it as I tore their lives out. To feel pain and make them feel pain. They couldn't make me feel pain.

"Arrah," I growled.

Mermaids couldn't hurt me.

Why did I rage? It was a surprising thought. One felt, one didn't question feelings. It was self-evident. One felt hunger, one felt tired, one felt lust and hate and anger. It didn't matter why. All that mattered was that you did.

"Arrah! Arrah!" I roared at the night.

I pushed the thought away, and stumbled to the Troll's Lodge.

Other Arukh were up. I hated the sight of their stupid, ugly, malicious faces. I pushed one or two down, the rest got away from me.

I swung around and around, growling at them.

Then I went back out and climbed to the top of the Lodge's roof.

"Arrah!" I bellowed into the night. No longer rage, but some strange intense emotion I could not describe swept me in its grip. "Arrah! Arrah!"

Over and over, I'd yell and pause and yell some more.

There was a sound on the roof.

The young female had followed me up, she watched me from the corner of the roof.

"Get away," I snarled. "Get away or I'll kill you."

I meant it.

She backed away, staring at me, but didn't leave.

"Get away."

I rushed her.

She scrambled backwards, until she was just clinging to the edge. She could be gone before I came any closer.

"Arrah," I snarled at her, but she didn't give any further, just watched with her glittering eyes. "Arrah!"

I stalked back to the top of the roof.

I glanced contemptuously at her.

"Arrah!" I howled at the city, again and again.

I sat on the roof, drained of the strange emotion that had possessed me. I no longer howled my fury at the night. I watched the sky brighten as the sun came up.

The little female was still watching me.

"Stories," I said to her, "just words. Nothing more."

She didn't reply, didn't respond. Just kept watching me.

"The nest," I said, "they were all dead, I dug and I dug, but they were already dead." I felt immensely sad. She would not understand, I was glad for that. "I could not save them."

That was all, I thought to myself. Just words. Words I'd heard many times before. So what?

The song?

It wasn't just noise. It was a good song, I decided. But it didn't mean anything. It was like stories. Just sounds.

Magic?

That had to be it, I decided. Someone had cast a spell on me, had made me feel these things.

The Mermaids?

I didn't think so. They weren't smart enough. Maybe they'd heard the story, but they hadn't understood it, or they wouldn't have played with me like that. They just weren't good at lying.

Probably, I thought to myself, they hadn't heard the story before I came there. Yes. That felt right. Probably the Elders had brought a Goblin to tell them about Arukh, after I visited. To try to scare them. That made sense. I nodded to myself.

The Mermaids simply were not very smart. They couldn't deceive me.

The thought felt pleasing, I hugged it to myself. It made me feel better.

It was foolish to hate the Mermaids. What could they do?

Magic, I thought. Copper Thoughts? Many Faces?

One of them had sent a spell against me, had tortured me with a song and a story and a memory. Foolish. Arukh were stronger than that.

Whatever it was, I decided, it had failed. The storms had passed through me, had burned out their fires. I felt strangely calm and relaxed. I almost liked the sensation.

I would see the Mermaids again, I decided. Just to show them their magic had failed.

The thought made me feel funny inside.

I left the Lodge, wandering restlessly. The city was still tense. I could see it in the way people looked at each other. In the way they started to distant noises.

My course took me through the Downriver, as I tried to grasp the song of the Mermaids. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to think of it. But somehow, I couldn't stop.

I stopped to watch two dogs fighting. Moved on. I took smoke with a mixed group, asked about iron knives. They didn't know anything. Moved on.

Inspected the wares of knife sellers in the market. Many of them were suspicious and hostile of Arukh, though a few had Arukh bodyguards. I showed silver and they became friendly.

There wasn't as much flint as there used to be. Copper and particularly bronze, was everywhere. Iron? Not much of it. Generally, iron was provided specially. Sometimes even made to commission. Nobody'd heard of a knife like I described.

I bought stew meats, and retreated to a corner to think about that. It was an unusual knife I'd hunted. Perhaps made to commission?

A group of Horsemen passed riding. I watched them. They wore trousers and wind jackets, with hair tied back in braids. It was a style I'd been seeing more and more in Humans. The Horsemen were strong, I supposed, so other humans imitated them, trying to capture a bit of their strength, a bit of their magic.

I went back and inquired of a few smiths. No commissions such as I'd described. I put down silver for the smiths to inquire of each other.

By the end of the day, my searches had yielded nothing. Whatever

history the knife carried, it was still unknown to me. I marked the setting sun. The feeding drums would start soon. Time to return to the Lodge.

There was a sudden rush of feet behind me. I sprinted forward, turning.

A Hobgoblin was almost upon me, stabbing knife out.

I roared and charged him. Hobgoblins were less than two thirds the size of Arukh. He stopped, bracing himself.

Just as I was upon him, a numbing blow glanced off my hip. He moved. Staggering, I brushed his strike against my forearm guard, metal ringing on metal for a second. The air whistled, and I barely stepped back in time to miss being hit again with a club.

"Arrah," I barked.

There was a second Hobgoblin with a club, and behind him, a third. They rushed me. I feinted to the side, slashed under the swing of the club. I backed away limping, towards a wall.

"Little fathers," I grunted, glancing around. "You've chosen poorly."

There, a fourth. I pretended to take no notice of him, snarling instead at the others, as he approached.

Then I wheeled and rushed him, carrying him on my knife with me to the wall. The Hobgoblin convulsed, his blood spilling from his mouth.

I cursed. I only wanted him hurt, not dead. Hurt, he'd scream and plead and melt their strength. Dead, there was nothing for them to hesitate at. I dumped the body to my left, and crouched with my back to the wall, staring at them.

One Arukh did not fear a single Hobgoblin. But three? Three were dangerous.

Wild Hobgoblins, I could see that. Scrawny and dirty, dressed in rags and pieces of leather, with none of the finery or style of those who served the Mothers. These were simply rats.

I barked at them.

"Little Fathers," I told them, "go away or I'll kill you all."

No reply.

The largest of them, a squat redhaired brute, had a heavy club. My hip

throbbed from the touch of that club. I stared at them. Their eyes were flat and glassy. Their ambush had failed, but they didn't have the sense to withdraw.

"Come on then," I whispered. "I'll kill you all."

The first had only knives. The last had a half spear with a wicked tip. Him I counted most dangerous.

They spread, closing in on me. What would they do? Probably a rush from knives or club to distract me, and the spear coming from behind. Knowing that didn't mean it wouldn't work. Guts tightening, I tried to crouch further back against the wall. Lips pulled tight, I grinned and showed them fangs.

Suddenly, with a fierce whoop, the little Arukh from the lodge was on top of the club wielder.

Bad choice, I thought. She'd lost surprise and he struggled. They rolled around for a second before she tore his throat open with her knife.

I leaped for the knife-wielder, smashing him down with vicious blows.

The spear-carrier watched for a second and fled.

It was only the work of seconds. I sucked great heaving breaths, staring at the bodies.

The little female crowed happily as she began to loot the body she'd killed. I didn't bother, I could tell they had nothing.

Why had they attacked? Were they just rats who misjudged their prey? Or was there something more, I wondered, remembering their silence and glassy stares. I rolled the one I'd killed over with my foot, staring at his face. Was there a suggestion of a running nose? Of drool from trickling down the side of his mouth? Magic?

Had they been set upon me by Copper Thoughts?

I shook my head. The little Arukh looked up at the motion, watching me.

"You're following me," I grunted at her.

She froze.

For a second, we stared at each other.

I snarled, deep in my throat.

She whined, shaking her head.

Then, over her shoulder, I saw the young Troll, heading back toward the Lodge.

If it was Shaman's work, I'd be safe enough near the Troll.

I called to join him. Warily, he let me walk near him.

The little one followed at a safe distance.

The Young Troll flipped me a bit of copper.

I plucked it out of the air.

"Tell me something," he said, holding up another piece.

I grunted questioningly.

"Why did you fight, back there, the girl and the two males?"

"Uh?" I grunted. It took me a moment to think what he was talking about. The rape.

I glanced back. The little one was still skulking after us, but not within earshot.

"She made too much noise," I said, "it irritated me."

"And the males?"

I grunted again. "They caused the noise."

"That's all?"

"Arrah," I replied. He flipped the coin to me.

He seemed disappointed, as if he wanted something more from me.

But what more could there be? I considered that if I could figure it out, I could lie and perhaps extort another coin.

We walked along in silence, as he considered this.

"There is a lot of noise," he said finally.

"Hers was very irritating. I didn't like her cries."

"There's more to it than that," he said.

I knew it, I thought. He was looking for something.

"Iron Pants..." I began. He looked blank. So he was known to the Trolls by some other name? I hadn't thought of that.

"The big Troll," I began again, "he tells you that it happens all the time.

There are no reasons. It just happens. That's all."

"I think that there is more to it," the Troll said.

He held up a gold coin.

"Give me the gold," I said, "I'll tell you everything."

He laughed.

"Troll not stupid," I said grudgingly. Not that stupid.

We walked along some more. I thought.

"I'm a good fighter," I said finally. "But there are many good fighters in the Lodge. Sometimes, they get confused. They might think I am weak. I can show them I am strong, hurt them. But good fighters fight, easy to get hurt, who knows?"

He listened.

"You show them you're strong," I said. "They don't get confused. Pick someone, hurt them. Everyone sees. They think 'strong fighter, we leave her alone.'"

"Why pick on the rape?" he asked.

"Everybody watched it. Everyone paid attention. Afterwards, Arukh keep watching, nothing else happening. Maybe something more will happen. I pick them, everyone watched me."

"The girl?"

"She's weak," I told him. "Exhausted and worn out. Can't fight. I kick her around, show everyone I'm strong. No risk. No danger."

"She follows you?"

"She does what she wants. So long as she doesn't come close. I don't want a slave."

"Why?"

"Arrah," I grunted irritably. "Ask her."

"The rapists? Why attack them? Why not just the girl."

"They're weak too. All tired out from fighting her. They have more strength. But I hit hard, hit fast. They go down. Everyone watches. Everyone sees I beat three Arukh. No one wants to fight me. Everyone knows I'm strong."

I glanced at him.

"Give me gold now."

"Did it bother you?" he asked. "Did the rape upset you?"

I didn't like the question.

I shrugged carefully, to show him it didn't matter. "She made too much noise."

"Did it ever happen to you?"

"No," I shook my head emphatically. "Never happened to me. I'm strong. I make them afraid."

He waited a few heartbeats.

"What about when you were small?"

"Arrah," I snapped irritably. "You ask too many questions. Keep your gold."

He flicked it at me anyway, smiling. I caught it and turned a sour look on him.

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

He just smiled at me.

I threw him a bit of copper. He caught it with a graceful swatting motion.

"I study Arukh."

I snarled.

I hate the Trolls.

The morning sun was unpleasant, but not too bothersome. It hung low in the sky, a great burning ball.

I was restless. I decided to wander back to the Selk territories. At least I wouldn't have to worry about Copper Thoughts there. No street shaman would intrude on a Kingdom not of his race. He was only dangerous in the borderlands.

I put on my great coat, shrugging into the shoulders, and headed out.

I came to the Mermaids' dock and shied away. There probably weren't any of them there. Instead, I headed further downriver. Selk stared at me curiously. There were a lot more of them than when I'd come at night.

I stopped to watch a group of children play, until their mothers,

disturbed by my presence, swept down to shoo them away.

I kept walking. The ground was soft beneath my feet. The buildings and houses all seemed like boxes, wooden frames lashed together, with the sides woven in. I stopped to peer at one edifice, an elaborate confection of beams and weavings and saw it rested on top of the ground, not in it. It was tethered loosely to three large poles, sunk deep into the earth.

I shook my head.

Why would anyone tether a building? It couldn't run away, could it?

And if so, why leave the tethers so loose?

Mysteries onto mysteries.

Out on the waters, were the great lodges of the high Selk. Only the low castes lived on the land, I decided.

Still, everyone I saw seemed healthy and happy. They stared at me, and I stared back frankly. I didn't see anyone but Selk. I was startled at how numerous they were.

Before I'd come here, I'd hardly seen any.

They congregated together, I realized. Other races outgrew the borders of their kingdoms, their peoples mixed and wandered. Not the Selk. They clung close to the water, and to each other.

The seashore formed a great boulevard, with perhaps a thirty-yard gap between the houses and the water. People walked back and forth, chatted or bargained. They worked at odd tasks. I passed a stoneman, chipping out flint edges, sitting in a grassy nest. His materials were all about him.

He looked up at me, startled.

"You find flint here?" I asked.

He laughed. "I buy it, I just like to work here, where I can see everything. I only have to make sure that I take all my leavings with me when I go."

"Why?" My brows knit in confusion.

"So that nobody steps on it and cuts their feet."

So what? I didn't bother to ask, I moved on.

Strange people.

I passed a group making a boat, weaving supple branches in and around a

frame. Next to them, another band weaving a net. The weavers worked with such concentration they didn't even look up as I passed. The edge of the water was dotted with watercrafts and docks and structures I couldn't identify.

The docks grew larger and heavier, extending further out onto the water. I walked down one so large that Vampires could drive cattle along it.

Along the side, fifteen or twenty fishermen had tethered their boats and were pulling nets up. They stared at me, pausing. I grinned. Other Selk could ignore me as I walked past, confident that I was not there for them. But here I was on the dock, it was harder to tell each other I was just passing through. I made them nervous.

Good.

There was a whispered conversation among them as some stared openly, and others tried to ignore me.

Finally, a middle aged Selk, naked but for a loincloth, walked up to me, his smooth body rolling with easy strength.

They were like otters, I thought again. You couldn't see the muscle, but it was there.

"Greetings," he said.

I grunted.

"You are Arash?" He gave the word a hissing sound.

Grunt.

"The one the Elders summoned... for the Mermaids?" I noticed that he didn't refer to the killing.

"I am."

He seemed relieved by this. He turned to his companions and shouted, "It is the Arash, the Elders' Arash."

This seemed to relieve them. There was a small chorus of greetings. Even the ones who'd been consciously ignoring me relaxed visibly.

He turned back to me.

"We're bringing the nets in. Would you like to join us?"

I shrugged. He seemed to take this as a yes, and lead me over to the

fishermen, rattling off names of introduction, which I didn't bother to remember.

The fishermen scuttled in and out of the boats, and in and out of the water. I wasn't going any further than the edge of the docks. Someone handed me a rope.

"What do I do?" I asked. The Selk on either side of me had ropes.

"Pull on the rope, and we'll pull the net in."

Simple enough.

I pulled. There was almost no weight to it. I pulled harder, drawing the weight onto myself, feeling the satisfying tug of mass. On the sides of me, Selk scrambled to keep up.

"She's strong," someone said.

I grinned.

The next net came up even more quickly. I was sweating though.

"You must be very hot in that coat," a near-naked fisherman said.

We pulled in a third net, just me and a couple of Selk. I noted that it took six or seven Selk to pull in a net, normally, and we did it much faster.

I took off my coat, going bare armed with tunic and leggings and armour. The Selk stole wide-eyed glances at me.

The fourth net came up. The fifth and sixth nets I pulled in alone, as they all stopped to watch.

And that was it. I backed away and sat down heavily, panting harshly. A couple of them were sorting fish into baskets. They moved near me and set their baskets close.

"Asok here, whites there, bigmouths in this."

Fish rapidly flew from the nets to their designated baskets.

I picked up a fish. It floundered in my hand and I slammed it against the dock to quiet it. I stared at it. Asok? White? Bigmouth? It looked like a fish.

I threw it into a basket.

It was simple, I picked up a fish, guessed, and threw it into a basket. Sometimes, with an apologetic smile, a Selk would move one of my fish into another basket.

The Captain, the older Selk who'd spoken to me first, came and sat beside me. He brought another, younger Selk.

"I thought you'd want to meet Jerva," he said, casually flipping fish into baskets, barely glancing at them. I stared at my fish. It was sort of white, but it had a big mouth. I chewed my lip.

"Yes?" I said.

I tossed it into a basket. The Captain took it out and put it in a different basket. When the baskets filled, one of the Selk would drag it aside and bring a fresh basket.

"His sister's a Mermaid."

I looked up at Jerva, staring hard. Looking for a resemblance. He had two legs and he looked like a Selk. They all looked alike. I wondered how they told each other apart.

"Really?"

"Oh yes, the family is blessed. His grandfather's brother, mother's side, was a Mermaid too, and one of their cousins was a Mermaid."

"Jerva's so holy," someone laughed, "he hardly needs to get into a boat. He can just walk on the water and pick up the fish as they tickle his feet."

Jerva blushed.

"Yeah, but his baskets sink, so he needs us after all."

He put his hand on my arm. I went still. The others noticed a tension.

He took his hand away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that our people like to touch."

"Arrah," I said quietly, grinning. "My people like to touch."

I meant it differently.

He extended his hand. I held up my bare arm, covered only on one side by a laminated wooden forearm guard. His fingers danced along my flesh, crawling like insects.

"Hairy," he said aloud, for his fellows. "Thick, but not as thick as dwarves. Strange skin, smooth but not smooth, and thin. It's like there isn't anything but muscle under the skin, hard muscle like wood."

He withdrew and stared at his fingers, as if I might have rubbed off on him.

The rest of them were staring. I bobbed my head at them, baring my teeth in the widest grin so that my black lips were stretched thin and my heavy fangs were plain to see.

"Ara... Arukh," the Captain said, pronouncing it carefully. "That's a Goblin word, isn't it."

"Yes." I let go of the grin.

"What does it mean?"

"Unwanted."

"Aah..." he said. He paused for a second, pretending to study a fish.

"I've heard the Dwarves use 'Hagrik'"

"That's what they call us," I said.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Oh," I thought for a second, putting words and sounds together in my head. "Abomination. It means 'lesser abomination.'"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"Hagrara means 'greater abomination'" I offered.

"I saw one of those once," a fisherman said, a few baskets down from us.

"Oh yeah?"

"When I went with the Dwarves on that delivery during the flood, about two years back."

"I remember."

"It was big, like a Giant, maybe bigger. But ugly, it had features like a Dwarf, but more so, all hairy and poke nosed. It was all twisted up, one foot deformed, and it had a hunch back and only one eye, because its face was sort of scrunched on one side."

"Kahugrakar," I said.

"You know it?" the Captain said surprised.

"Only by reputation, there aren't that many Hagrara. They call them Ohgra or Ogre in the trade speech."

"The trade speech is hard," a Selk volunteered. I was surprised, so much of the trade speech seemed to be Selk that I had hardly any trouble speaking to them. I just avoided the parts and words that I knew to be from Goblin or Dwarf tongues.

Which was odd, now that I thought of it. The Selk kept to themselves. How was it that everyone used so many of their words in the trade speech?

"Yeah," someone else said, "all those kakaka and tatata, it hurts the throat."

"Dwarves," the one who'd seen the Ohgra said. "It's how they talk, too. I was in the wagon with Dwarves, when I went out, and all of a sudden, they started talking. Kukukuk Akakak kukuku. I thought they were all dying. But they just kept on that way."

"Goblins aren't so bad," someone said, "but they've got all these clicks when they talk, even in trade speech. It's all Tiktiktik."

"Tiktiktiktik," someone trilled, and stopped abruptly. "Ow, that hurts!"

They laughed.

"So what are Mermaids, anyway?" I asked.

"They're holy," the Captain said simply.

"But where do they come from? Are they a mixed race?" I persisted.

"Mixed race?" the Captain looked confused.

"They come from Selk?"

"Yes."

"Selk and what?"

"What?"

I grunted with exasperation.

"Like Arukh, from Vampire and Goblin. Kobold, dwarf and goblin. Hobgoblin, Human and Goblin. Mermaid, Selk and what?"

"Just Mermaid. If you're blessed, a Mermaid is born. We don't have mixes."

"I don't know," a fisherman at the far corner said speculatively, "look at Shishini."

I looked around.

"He's not here."

"Oh."

"Shishini looks like a Dwarf."

"No he doesn't!"

"Where's the hair? Where's the great big nose?"

"But he's short and squat like a Dwarf. He has hands like a Dwarf."

"But he looks like a Selk."

"Swims like one too."

"Shishini could be a mix."

They seemed doubtful.

"Maybe a little mix," the Captain said finally. "But we don't get much mixing. Other people don't do it like us."

"How do you do it?" I asked. How could they do it differently?

That provoked ribald laughter.

"The normal way," someone said.

"Dwarves do it laying on land."

"Uck!" came a response.

"I did it on land once," a fisher woman said. Her name was Fha something or other.

"With a Dwarf?"

She made a face.

"Don't be grotesque. With a Selk. We were young."

"How was it?"

"It was awful. We couldn't find a good position. Half the time he was crushing me. We got all scratched up and pebbles stuck to my ass."

"If that's how Dwarves do it," a Selk said, "I'm not surprised they look like they do."

"I hear that Vampires do it on horseback?" a Selk addressed me. "Is that true?"

"Yes," I said.

"That sounds like hard work."

I grunted.

"We hardly see Vampires, just the wagon drivers, and they stay away from the water. Why is that?"

I shrugged. "Vampires don't like water."

"I hear it's because they have a great big stone in their gut, so that if

they go in water, the stone will weigh them down, and they'll drown."

"Is that true?" Jervo asked.

"Yes," I lied.

This fascinated them.

"How big a stone?"

I indicated something the size of my head.

"How did they get it in there?"

"Different ways." I offered imaginative possibilities for males and females.

"What's it for?"

"It helps them to ride. Keeps weight low."

"Aaah," the Captain said, "it's all clear now."

They nodded their heads wisely. I grinned at them.

"Tell me something," I asked, "as I came here, I see houses tethered. Why?"

"Oh," said the Captain. "Spring floods. Our houses float. Tethers keep them from sailing away."

"Arrah," I said. Floating houses. Right. They were making fun of me, I decided sourly. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Arash," the Captain said suddenly. "We'll call you Arash, its the easy way to say it."

I shrugged.

"Rishi," someone suggested.

"Arash, Rishi, same thing."

"Very strong, are you from the same as... Hagrara."

"No," I replied, "different blood."

"Not so strong," said a heavyset Selk. "I can pull twenty, twenty-five nets. She pulled six and tired."

"You weren't watching her," the Captain said, "you were on the other side. She pulled a whole net, all by herself, and faster than we could."

"Fighter's strength," Jerva said. "If I was in a fight, I'd want all my strength at once, when I needed it. Not spread out."

"There you have it," the Captain said, sorting the last basket. "She's a

fighter, not a fisherman, and good thing too, or she'd put us all to shame."

There was still a pile of fish, gathered into a mound before us. The fishermen had made this pile, selecting particular fish and setting them aside for reasons unknown to me.

The captain pulled a large fish forward, and produced a flint knife.

"You eat fish?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Oh, good. I heard someplace that you drank blood?"

"Sometimes."

He glanced at me, worried for a second.

"Will you feast with us?" he asked nervously.

"All right."

He gave a relieved bark. "I should have asked you earlier. Bad luck to put a person to work and not feed them."

With nimble fingers he gutted the fish, tossing the innards casually over the dock, excising fins and tail. He spread the opened fish out, and picked another one.

Other Selk, produced their own flint knives and began to carve up fish.

I watched them with interest. The way the fish were opened up reminded me of Mira.

"You use stone knives?" I asked casually.

"Nothing better, copper, bronze. Hard to handle, too much work to maintain. A good flint you can trust to serve you well," the Captain said.

Three economical cuts, and the fish was laid out flat. Some of the Selk were already eating the raw fish.

"Asanavo," the Captain shouted. "You and Vhalalah, have finished eating. Check the pots. Perhaps we'll have a treat for our guest."

The female who'd had sex on land, and another Selk got up to pull up lines that hung from the dock's pillars.

"Here," the Captain said, putting a piece of fish in my hands. "Eat. It's good."

They all stared at me as I put the fish in my mouth and chewed.

"We feed this city," the Captain said, "we Selk. Sure, the humans dig up

roots and things, and the Dwarves bring things down the river, and once or twice a year, the Vampires will drive animals through. But that's not enough and not steady enough. That's just a change of diet now and then."

In the city, I'd eaten smoked fish, or dried fish, or the heavy fish that the Dwarves kept in sauce barrels, thick and rancid.

"We catch the fish steady. No fish, no eating, no city. That's why the other Kingdoms bow to us."

Other Kingdoms bowed to the Selk? As far as I'd been concerned, they might as well not have existed, until lately. How much of that was real, and how much their own inflated delusions?

The Vampires boasted that the city only existed because they drove enough cattle meat in during the migrations to sustain the population.

"Wagons are here," a Selk said.

"I see them," the Captain replied.

I glanced. Away from the dock, there were a couple of wagons, Vampires drawing them. I made out a Gnome and a half dozen Dwarves. They seemed to be keeping busy with the wagon.

Foodstuffs changed from season to season. But fish were a big part of peoples' diets in most seasons. They were, I decided, more important than I'd thought them, if not as important as they thought.

The fish was light and fresh. Uncooked, it was different than I'd tasted before. Almost clean. It tingled on my tongue.

It reminded me of when I was younger, raiding the old Troll's fish traps. Afterwards, I'd begun to make my own. They hadn't worked very well, until the old Troll had come upon some, and mistaking them for his own, fixed one. Stupid Troll.

"It is good fish," I said. They applauded.

He grinned.

"Next time you want good fish, the way they should taste, and not what the Dwarves give out, you search me out."

I nodded.

"What about iron?" I asked bluntly, "is it better than copper or bronze?"

He looked up at me, blankly.

"Oh," he said, "you mean that Troll foolishness. Never seen it. Personally, I don't think it'll catch on."

"Got a couple," the female Selk called.

"Check the rest, and bring them over," he ordered, before turning back to me.

"Copper and bronze," he said, "they might have their uses, but there are a lot of other things that work better for most purposes. I'll take a good flint any day.

"But iron? Who'd have a use for that?

"No," he concluded, "it's just more Troll nonsense."

"Did you know," someone told me, "that the Trolls are working on a gadget to make nets?"

"I've seen those nets, too regular, all the same size holes," someone said. "Didn't Chermi try one out?"

"Yeah," someone laughed, "fell apart after a day."

"You know what the Trolls did?"

"What?"

"They went to Chermi and asked him to tell them everything that had gone wrong with the net."

This provoked general laughter.

"Did they have a couple of days to spare?" someone chuckled.

"Chermi would complain over every knot in a good net," the Captain told me conspiratorially.

"Arrah," I said, nodding wisely.

"That's the way Trolls are," someone said. "Flighty and irresponsible. They have no sense to them."

That's the way Trolls are? Flighty and irresponsible? I thought incredulously.

"Have you ever met a Troll?" I asked.

The Captain shrugged.

"No, but everyone knows that Trolls don't have a lick of sense. They're always chasing off after any damn fool notion that passes through their

heads. Like making iron that no one needs, or a device to make nets that no one wants."

Fools, I thought. They're complete fools. If anything, they were stupider than the Mermaids, to be so completely mistaken about Trolls. Trolls watched. Trolls were hideously clever, hideously dangerous. Trolls were to be feared.

There was a sort of superficial sensibility to what they said, but it was the wrong shape to fit in my head. Besides, anyone who'd ever met a Troll wouldn't dare to think of them like that.

Trolls were simply dangerous. That was all you had to know. That was all that mattered.

"More than a dozen!" reported the female, Fha... no Vhalala, was her name.

"Good," the Captain said, "enough for everyone."

She dropped off a basket, in the centre of the group. I stared at it dubiously. It was full of armoured crawling things, like giant insects.

"Scuttlers," the Captain said, fetching one out. "Bottom dwellers. We catch them in pots... well, we call them pots, but they're a sort of basket."

He tore a claw off and cracked it between his teeth, holding the rest of it carefully so that its waving pincers and remaining claw stirred futilely.

"Good eating," he said, sucking the meat out.

He tore off a pincer and handed it to me. I took it dubiously. He tore another pincer off for himself.

"Uhhh," he grunted, putting it between his teeth and looking at me expectantly.

I put mine between my teeth. He seemed to smile. He moved his jaw in a certain way, cracking the shell but not crushing it. I did the same.

Then he took it out and used his thumb to pry the shell apart and the meat out, he put the meat in his mouth. I repeated his action.

"Good?" he asked.

I chewed, and nodded. It was almost sweet.

As if it was a signal, the other Selk began to pull their own Scuttlers from the basket.

Jerva seized a large one and handed it to me.

"The big one is for you," he said.

I held it carefully so it's waving claws couldn't reach me.

"Arrah," I said staring at it. Ugly thing.

Arukh of the sea, I thought, crawling along the bottom, all useless claws and pincers and armour at the mercy of everything above.

"You live to die another day," I told it, and hurled it back into the waters.

One Selk, watching me, nudged another, almost smiling. I pretended not to notice them.

Jerva and others passed me pincers, which I cracked and ate.

Finally, as we were finishing, the Gnome and a Dwarf approached us.

"Phissitik," the Captain said, mispronouncing obviously. "You're late again. If you'd been faster with the wagon, you'd have been able to share in the feast."

The Dwarf shrugged. "Wagon takes the time it takes," he said. Behind him, other Dwarves approached.

I moved up from my sitting position, crouching warily. The Dwarf glanced at me. He stopped and looked me up and down.

"Strange visitor," he grunted.

"Fine company," the Captain said. "Told us Vampire secrets."

The Dwarf grunted.

"Good catch."

"Fill your wagons, good fish too."

Shrugging back into my greatcoat, I stood by while the Gnome and the Captain haggled over prices. The Captain finally settled for a price that I thought was much too low.

I watched the Dwarves and Selk ferry the bushels over to the wagons. The two waiting Vampires stood with their oxen, and refused to come close to the dock.

I watched them.

"Heading up town?" I asked the head Dwarf.

He looked at me, blinking.

"Need a fighter?"

"For fish?" he asked incredulously.

I grinned.

"Lot of things can happen," I replied, easily.

He stared at me, trying to gauge my intentions.

"You can come with us," he said finally, "pay you a copper. Everybody but the Vampires walk on the way back."

I shrugged.

"Pay first," I told him.

He fished out a piece of copper, and flipped it to me.

I stepped towards the wagons. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned snarling.

It was the Captain. He stared at me soberly.

"This thing you do for the Elders," he said. "You will find it, won't you? For the Mermaids."

"Find it," I said, "and kill it. For the Mermaids."

I grinned as he drew back.

The two wagons groaned under the weight of the bushels of fish. Two Vampires rode the oxen that drew the wagon, guiding them. The Gnome sat upon the second wagon. The rest of us, a half dozen Dwarves and myself, walked alongside.

"You took a good price," I said to the Gnome. "It costs much more in the markets."

He laughed.

"Zizga! Hah. Every time I see him, I worry about him stripping the feather cloak from my back."

Zizga. The captain had never told me his name. Accidental? I doubted it. He'd been free with the names of his companions.

"You didn't bring it," I observed. He wasn't wearing ceremonial robes, the feathered cloaks of the gnomes.

"I did once, early on. It stank of fish for a week after."

"Whites" I asked.

"Flatheads," he replied, and looked at me strangely, wondering how I

knew to guess.

"You should make a healthy profit on the fish."

He shrugged. "Salting and smoking, curing and barrelling. Every fishmonger bargaining us down, taking their own cuts. Not that much. We'll be lucky to cover our costs. That copper you extorted may break us. We'll have to see."

I laughed and walked over to keep pace with the head Dwarf.

"Strange folk," I said, "no use for copper or bronze."

He nodded. "Strange folk indeed. Peculiar ways. Come too early, and they'll make you eat raw fish. They had me eat a sea bug once, pretended that it was a treat."

I grunted in answer.

"Nowadays, we make sure to stay well away until we see they're finished the catch feast. You'd be amazed at the things they'll drag up and eat."

"Which are better," I asked, "fish or beast?"

The Vampire riding the ox nearest to us burst out laughing.

"What a question!" she exclaimed. "Beasts, you can ride, they carry and draw, they provide sustenance of many sorts, leather and bone. Fish? All you can do with fish is eat them."

She made a sour face.

"If you have a taste for that sort of thing."

"I don't know," said the Dwarf reflectively. "Hard times without fish. Hard times without beasts. I'd hate to choose."

I nodded.

"Fish stink," the Vampire offered.

"Beasts don't stink?" the Dwarf asked.

"Healthy smell, smell of life. Fish stink of death."

The Dwarf stared at me.

"We don't see many Hagrik around here," the Dwarf said finally.

"We don't see any," the Vampire commented.

"Perhaps you don't come often enough."

"Twice a day."

"Arukh like the night."

"No," said the Vampire, "nothing in Selk places but Selk. A Goblin comes, that's news. We hear about it. Never heard of Rughk coming here."

"It would be like Vampires coming to buy fish," the Dwarf joked.

"Funny," said the Vampire, her eyes dancing. "Maybe you like to walk with all these fish?"

"What were you doing there?" the Dwarf asked.

I shrugged. "Looking for work. There's a war coming."

They chuckled.

"Smart Hagrik," the Vampire laughed. "Very smart. War won't touch the Selk. Selk never war. They keep to themselves, look after their own. Don't get involved."

"Not," said the Dwarf, "a bad philosophy."

"I hear that Vampires and Dwarves fight?" I asked curiously. They seemed too comfortable with each other. It was almost like they started and finished each other's sentences.

"That's not us," said the Dwarf. "That's the rich and the powerful. The Totems with too much wealth and too little sense. Ask me," he grumbled, "everyone should leave everyone alone. It's hard enough to get along as it is."

"War," he spat. Then he went silent for a moment, his eyes misted, as if he was looking at something inside himself. His lips moved. Then he spoke again. "You know about the last war. Worm Totem. Mighty in the Kingdom. Ruined. Nothing but ruin. That's war."

"Curling Tusk Lineage," the Vampire said, "mightiest of the southern lines. Ruined."

"What do we get in return?" the Dwarf asked. "A band of Kobolds, running around in the mud, digging holes and proclaiming their Secret Kingdom."

"Fools!" he said. "What will the next war bring? A parliament of rats? A confederacy of carrion birds?"

"Orc Nation?" the Vampire said.

"Ah," the Dwarf said, "she makes a joke. Ha ha. No, nobody learns

anything. What did the last war bring? Ruin and misery. What will the next bring? More of same."

"No war," said the Vampire. "Won't happen. Too many Traditional Vampires in the city now. Dwarves won't risk fighting Traditionals. Even if they win, end of beast drives; herds don't come, end of city."

"And the city Vampires are doing their best to keep as many Traditionals in the city as they can," said the Dwarf.

"Are they?" I asked.

"It's what I would do," the Dwarf shrugged.

"War will happen," said the Gnome.

"Oh yes," said the Vampire rolling her eyes, "and you gamble with the High Gnomes. That's why you're riding a fish wagon."

"It's common knowledge," the Gnome said defensively.

"What's common knowledge?"

"Snow Leopard Totem has invested too much to back down. No war, and they're ruined. They've pulled four or five other Totems in with them."

"What about the Horsemen?" I asked.

The Vampire jeered.

"They call themselves Horsemen, but from what I've heard, riding isn't the word for what they do."

"What is it that they do?" the Dwarf asked.

"What they're good at, I'm told, isn't so much riding, as managing not to fall off."

"You've seen the Horsemen ride?" I asked. I'd watched them. They weren't as good riders as Vampires, but they were good.

"I've just heard about them."

"I've seen the Horsemen," the Dwarf said. "Strutting assholes. Won't eat fish. Only meat."

"The Horsemen are the key to the Snow Leopards plans."

"Then they're ruined. Maybe a sensible Totem will take their place."

"What Totem are you?" I asked.

"Fish hawks," he said proudly.

"Never heard of it."

"Like a Hagrik keeps track of the Totems, eh?" he laughed at me. "We're a city Totem, not very big, not recognized by the Kingdom."

"Sort of a Secret Kingdom," I baited him.

It was my turn to laugh, as he cursed me hotly, for my suggestion of Kobold taint.

"The Horsemen are important to the Snow Leopards plans," the Gnome repeated, trying to move the conversation away.

"Well then," said the Vampire, "they're ruined from the start. The lineages will cut them to pieces."

"It's more complicated than that," the Gnome persisted. "The Snow Leopard Totem bought the Horsemen, then they used the Horsemen and their wealth to win control of the Human Kingdom."

"Might as well win control of an anthill," the Dwarf joked.

"They had to use all their wealth and credit to get the Human Kingdom under the horsemen, but then they used their power in the Human Kingdom to bring the other Totems under them. Then they used that to consolidate their hold on the Humans. Very clever."

"How long can they hold the Human Kingdom?" the Vampire scoffed. "A week or two, before the Humans break apart and go following the next chieftain or shaman."

"Or the Totems," the Dwarf said, "I can't see the other Totems bearing the expenses of this adventure with the Humans."

"That's why they have to make war," the Gnome said. "Sooner or later, it all falls apart. Their only chance to hold it together is to win wealth and power from the Vampires to cover their debts."

"Fat chance," said the Vampire.

"They bring the force of two Kingdoms." The Gnome shrugged.

So war was inevitable. That seemed to cast a pall over the group.

"I heard that the Selk had Mermaids?" I said. "Half Selk, half fish."

"In Selk waters, there are a few."

"What are they like?"

The Dwarf shrugged.

"Only saw them a few times. Mostly from a distance. Once one came up

close and looked at me, but then she got bored and swam away. They're like Selk, only with a fish's tail."

"Where do you find Mermaids?" I asked. "I'd like to see some, sometime."

The Dwarf shrugged.

"They have their places."

"Easy to get to?"

Shrug.

"Where would you go?"

He turned to me.

"You talk a lot for an Arukh," he said accusingly.

"Not talk," the Vampire said suddenly. "Lots of Arukh talk. This one asks questions. Arukh don't ask questions. Not unless they're up to something."

"What do you want?" the Dwarf asked harshly.

"Nothing," I said suddenly. "Just talking, that's all."

"Not just talking," the Dwarf insisted.

He raised a hand, bringing the wagons to a halt.

"An abomination in Selk territory. I've never heard of that. I don't think it's good. Now the abomination asks questions. Wants to know about Mermaids. I don't think that's good either."

"Arrah," I rumbled.

"You think you can just walk in there. No. The minute you step into Selk territory, they watch you. No place to hide, no place to skulk. Only Selk, everywhere you look, and you."

"Whatever you're planning, forget it. It won't work. And don't think you'll be able to get back. When I return, I'll warn them about you."

"Mind your own house," I snarled.

"Selk aren't my people. But they're people, and they don't do anyone harm. I'll be damned if I see a thing like you among them and say nothing."

I growled deep in my throat, rocking back and forth. The Dwarf took a step back.

"Don't try it," a voice warned behind me.

I turned a little, to see. The Vampires crouched on their oxen, ready to spring.

"Arrah?" I made the sound deep in my throat. "I'm not afraid."

"You can't fight us all," the Dwarf said. I turned back to him. "Go away. Get out of here."

I turned from one to the other, and then stalked away, snarling. They watched me for a while, before starting up their caravan again, much more cautious now.

I wasn't much bothered. Growling is a way of life. I thought about the conversation. Their bickering had been interesting but inconsequential. But the way they'd reacted at the end suggested that they knew something was wrong among the Selk.

If I believed them, there'd be no way an Arukh could walk in and steal a Mermaid.

I'd walked pretty freely through Selk lands. But I hadn't actually threatened anyone. What if I had? Would there be resistance? How long would it take?

I'd be noticed though. I believed that. The fishermen had known about me, about why I was there. So had the Mermaids. What the Dwarves said about being watched and being seen rang true.

So how did an Arukh, how did anyone, steal a Mermaid without being seen?

I went to the local market and bought dried fish from a fishmonger. I was suddenly aware of how many fishmongers there were.

I climbed a wall and chewed dried fish slowly, watching the city from my perch.

How do you steal a Mermaid, without being seen?

You can't.

Which suggested two things: One, the theft had been seen, and the Elders were not telling me things.

Why do that?

Two, the Mermaid hadn't been stolen. Instead, it had come on its own, to a place where it could be taken.

Had Mira been seduced, lured to her destruction? Perhaps.

By an Arukh?

Most of us weren't that good.

I'd been the first Arukh the others had seen. Wait, was that true? Yes, upon reflection I thought it was. I could ask directly. But anyway, that didn't necessarily mean that Mira hadn't seen one. Perhaps she'd said something.

I'd have to talk to the Mermaids again.

A small Arukh, I thought. Male. Iron knife. Very mad. Very clever. Very, *very* clever, I added to his description. Stealthy enough to go unseen, clever enough to lure a Mermaid.

I threw bits of dried fish for the birds, watching carrion crows fight over them.

A mad, clever Arukh. Shouldn't be too hard to find.

The Downriver, when I returned, was buzzing with news of another battle.

Every Vendor, every little clump and group of people I encountered spoke of nothing else. Rumours flew back and forth, heroic battles, great victories, terrible disasters. The elements were in upheaval and the waters ran red with blood.

The Vampires, it seemed, had tried to take the Lesser Market. They'd run a stampede in. That much it seemed was agreed upon.

The Horsemen had simply allowed Vampires and animals in, killing at the entrances until the ways were blocked by mounds of dead beasts. Then they and the Dwarves had slaughtered the Vampires trapped inside, and taken great wealth in horses and cattle.

Some said that the Vampires had merely demonstrated their power, had taught the Dwarves a lesson in that they could stampede beasts where and as they pleased. No one quite dared to call it a victory for the Vampires.

It was generally seen as a great disaster for the Vampire Kingdom. Many Vampires had died, even Traditionals. Many beasts had been lost. The Dwarves and Horsemen would have meat for weeks.

I listened with only mild interest. Thinking of my Arukh.

Was he wild? I wondered. Living and hiding alone in the Downriver?

Somehow I doubted it.

It wasn't safe for an Arukh alone. Goblins and Hobgoblins were well behaved when we faced them, but let them find a sleeping Arukh....

I shuddered.

Solitary Arukh did not survive long. We needed someone to shelter us. That's why the Lodges existed.

How long had the killings been going on? Weeks? Months? Too long for an Arukh that clever, and with an iron knife, that wealthy, to be on his own.

He had to have a safe hole. A Lodge, or a band.

But if he were with a Lodge or a band, then others would know of him. One way or another, they would know something of him, whether it was his cleverness, his tastes or his knife.

Many of the kingdoms sponsored lodges in the downriver which offered food and lodging to Arukh to keep them out of their realms. It kept them safe from us, and when they had use for us, or when they needed to revenge some injury, they knew where to look.

Greasy Thumbs was the largest Lodge. It was run by a family of Trolls, none of whom were named Greasy Thumbs. Most Lodges in the Downriver were run by Trolls, though it was mainly the Dwarves that hired from them.

I was not such a fool as to enter a strange Lodge. There would be challenges and bellowing and perhaps fights as they sized me up and assessed my position in the Lodge.

I only wanted information. I didn't want to move in. Outside the Lodges, lone Arukh or small groups congregated, gambling or eating, gossiping or playing at mock combat. Someone beat a makeshift drum, while a few did shuffling dances. Here and there, Arukh gathered around small fires, sucking smoke.

Outside, the challenges were desultory, easily avoided or overawed.

I squatted outside and waited.

Eventually, a male, grinning around split lips came over to me.

"Where you come from?" he lisped

"Iron Pants."

"What you want here?"

"Smoke."

He grinned, showing blackened fangs.

"Got smoke. Got good smoke." He glanced at my body. "How you pay?"

I threw him a piece of copper. He caught it effortlessly.

"Good smoke inside," he said.

I laughed harshly. To follow him inside would be to walk into an ambush or rape.

"Free smoke," he said, smiling. Trying to tempt me.

I grunted and gestured.

"Over there."

He led me over to the smoke fire. Arukh were gathered around tightly, but he shouldered in and made a place for me with only a minimum of snarling.

"I don't know you," the fire master growled.

Blackened fangs grunted a few times on my behalf and I tossed the fire master a copper. He subsided.

I wasn't interested in smoke. I inhaled and then exhaled quickly, feeling a wave of dizziness pour over me, and then fade away.

Talk was of the War and the recent battles. I listened, hearing nothing new, ignoring the speculations and guesswork.

"I'm looking for an Arukh," I said finally.

Noncommittal grunts.

I briefly considered holding up another copper. But that would just be an invitation to lie, or to try and take it from me.

I gave them combinations of descriptions, trying to ring a response. Some of them seemed to respond to parts, but no one recalled an Arukh with an iron knife, or a taste for the sort of mutilation I described.

"What you want with this Arukh?" the fire master asked.

I shrugged.

"To kill him," I replied.

They all shrugged and shuffled indifferently.

I moved on, sitting near a group playing a game of bones. When the casts ended, I joined the new throws and again asked my questions. Nothing. I lost the coppers I gambled and moved on again.

Disappointed, I went to One Tusk's Lodge and found a small group of Gamblers. I won and learned nothing. I asked for clever Arukh, for Arukh with exotic knives and tastes.

"Where'd he come from? Maybe we know him?" a one eyed male asked.

It was a good question. Where had he come from? I wondered about it.

He had to come from somewhere. That knife had to come from somewhere. Surely such a violent sexual madness had to have roots. Had he arrived from outside the city? Or had his madness grown slowly, flowering in blood?

I adjusted my questions, looking for new Arukh, fresh come to the lodges in the last few months. Or for solitary Arukh, growing stranger with passing time.

Nothing.

As the evening wore on, I wandered from Lodge to Lodge. Hovering outside until they accustomed to my presence. Sooner or later an Orc from the lodge would come out and squat before me. Or I would join a small group, gambling or smoking or gossiping. Sometimes I paid coppers, sometimes I lost them, or won them in games. Always, I asked questions.

I learned nothing. There were many males. Some had the build I described, some were recent, others were clever. No one had a knife like the one I told about. Many had violent sexual madnesses, but none so virulent as I described.

My Arukh didn't belong to any of the Lodges I canvassed. If he existed, he had to belong to a small band, or be affiliated with a Kingdom.

At a small Lodge run by Dwarves, I encountered something odd.

"Saw a body," a male fighter said. He wore good armour. "Like you say. Eyes, tongue, crotch, many cuts."

I threw him a coin.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"A while back," he said. "Months."

He shrugged.

"Not much to say," he grunted. "It was cut up like you said."

"Lots of blood?"

He squinted, thinking.

"Some. Not much."

He wasn't communicative.

"How'd you find it?"

"Didn't. Some Dwarf found it, we just came and collected it."

"Kobold body?"

He glanced at me. "No. Dwarf."

He gave me a quizzical expression, as if to ask what possible interest a Dwarf might have in a Kobold Corpse.

A Dwarf corpse. That made no sense.

"Where'd you collect it?"

"Up north city. Dwarf territory, just outside high Kingdom."

"Arrah," I thought out loud. "near Vampire lands?"

He shrugged.

"Yes."

"Was this the only body you saw?" I asked.

"Yes."

I ground my teeth, trying to think of things to ask him. He communicated almost nothing.

"You work for Dwarves?" I asked finally.

"We all work for Dwarves," he said. "Dwarf Lodge. Well trusted. First called."

"What were you doing when the body was found?"

He grunted, irritated by the questions.

"Bodyguard," he said. "Lots of work then. Many bodyguards. Not like now. War coming. Do they hire? No. Stupid Dwarves."

That was the most I'd gotten out of him. Something tickled at my mind.

"Why were they hiring many bodyguards back then?"

He shrugged.

"Other bodies. Dwarves frightened. They hire to protect them. Outclan Dwarves. Trusted Arukh. Many hired. Women protected."

Other bodies?

"Bodies like the one you saw?"

"Could be." Shrug.

"How many?"

"Some." Shrug.

"Did the Dwarves find who made the bodies?"

"Don't know." Shrug. Annoyed grunt.

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happened? What did the Dwarves do about the bodies?"

"Hired bodyguards. Lots of work then. Bodies stop appearing. Dwarves slowly stop hiring. War coming. Still not hiring. Stupid Dwarves."

I gave up. If there had been killings among Dwarves, they hadn't been recent. I could find out about them if I needed to.

The most interesting thing about what he'd said was where the body had been found. Up near Vampire territory.

Dwarves didn't keep Arukh in their territories. They maintained and hired from Downriver Lodges.

Vampires, on the other hand, kept their own tame lodges of Arukh. If the killings had begun in the north of the city, upriver, then it was probably from the Vampire Lodges.

Assuming, I thought, that it was an Arukh.

I didn't seriously consider the killer as a Selk, regardless of what I'd told the Ublul. It seemed clear he'd begun elsewhere and only lately worked his way to the Selk.

He could be a renegade Vampire, or a Dwarf, or a Kobold.

Or a Shaman...

The sun was well into the sky as I made my way back to Iron Pants' Lodge, thinking of Copper Thoughts. I was very tired, and the sun glared

in my eyes, its burning touch making exposed skin crawl and covered flesh sweat.

If it was Arukh, then it was rogue and on its own, or it was very closely affiliated with one of the Kingdoms. Vampires kept Arukh lodges in their Kingdom.

I tried the thought out. It felt right. Vampires kept Arukh, Vampires kept horses, the body had been found near the Vampire Kingdom. Perhaps my Arukh was a Vampire slave. Or perhaps it was a Vampire.

The young female approached me. I snarled at her, regarding her with distaste. Then I took another look.

Her voice had always had the lilt of Arukh from Vampire lodges...

We stood just inside watching, waiting for our eyes to adjust.

The Vampire Lodge was almost empty. Only a handful of Arukh remained. We watched as a few approached us.

"Arrah," a big female grunted gutturally, "who owns you?" She had a thin ridge of stiff hair standing high down the center of her head. On either side were livid lines of fire scar. Her left eye was buried in scar tissue.

She rocked from side to side.

I just rocked and grunted back at her.

The little female beside me backed away, hissing.

A couple of more Arukh came up. Another female, heavy limbed, bloated belly. A male, breath spitting from a hole in his cheek. Another male hung back, half crippled, missing most of an arm.

We rocked from side to side, grunting and snarling. The bloat-bellied female lost interest, but others came up. The big female bent down, pounding the ground with meaty fists.

"Arrah! Arrah!" Bellows rang out.

My temples pounded.

I rushed forward roaring, a few backed away. The big female held her ground. I retreated. A few advanced, and then stopped, returning to their original position.

"Arrah!" The burned female rushed towards me. I held still waiting for her to reach me. She smacked the ground with her fists, roaring with each step.

I danced to the side, grabbing her, using her mass to swing her around. She thrashed convulsively as I had her in the air and flung her at the other Arukh. About to rush, they scattered.

The burned woman landed on her shoulder. Kicking her feet, she twisted and rolled, finding her balance just as I was atop her.

I skipped back, feeling her answering slash whistling past me.

I snarled, advancing carefully, trying to get on her blind side. Crouching, she retreated, growling, pulling herself higher with each scuttling step until she stood upright.

"Arrah," she growled.

"Arrah," I rumbled back. We snarled and hissed at each other for another minute.

Finally she straightened up. Spitting at my foot, she turned her back and stalked away.

One by one, the other Arukh lost interest, hissing and spitting, they backed away, or turned and walked off. A few rushed at my little one, but I hissed them away, bobbing my head at them with quick jerks.

I hated that I was defending her. It felt like weakness.

We walked further into the Lodge. It was different from the Trolls' Lodges. Smaller, with a lower ceiling. The air was heavy with the scent of offal and burning dung. Instead of cubholes that you could seal after you, there were only stalls. I stared at them. Parted by walls too high to the ceiling to climb over, they slanted forward, towards the doors.

"So the Masters can ride in," the small female said behind me. I glanced at her.

"Masters ride," she said, "no way to keep them out. No way to hide."

"Arrah," I said.

We skirted around a huge fire pit, embers still burning in the center, split bones scattered around the edges. Rot sacks lay around the hollow, empty but still redolent. I toed a cattle skull absently.

There was no high place, no defended platform, as in the Troll's lodge.

The keepers of this Lodge did not stay within.

"Arrah," I said, glancing at the female, "who runs this place?"

She grinned, pleased that I had spoken to her.

"The Masters," she said, "the Masters. They don't come in except to kill. Whatever we need, is driven in."

Yes, I thought. That made sense. The Troll's house in Downriver was like a fortress within and without. The Troll ran it from his platforms. We who lived there all had our secure places.

There was no secure place here. The building could be knocked down or burned easily. The interior offered no shelter. A determined attack that got into the building could sweep right through.

But this Lodge was in Vampire Territories. They weren't interested in making their slaves difficult to kill.

"How do you know these things?" I asked.

"Grew up in Vampire lodges."

"Arrah?"

"Ran away to Downriver. Last summer back."

I grunted without interest.

"You know all the lodges?"

She shrugged.

"Lodges are lodges, Arukh come, Arukh go."

"You know these Arukh?"

She shook her head.

I grunted. No one runs this place, I thought. They just stored Arukh here.

"There aren't enough," I said out loud, turning around. There weren't enough Arukh. There were perhaps a dozen. A Lodge this size, there should have been a hundred or more. "War?"

I scanned the Arukh, who were staring sullenly back at me.

Older ones, mainly, and a couple of cripples. No young Arukh. No fiery healthy ones. The ones who sat here were scarred and patient and mean.

I noted the cripple that had come out to meet us with the others. Half an

arm held protectively against his body, his legs twisted so that he could barely walk.

My eyes held his a second too long. He began to scramble away.

"Arrah," I snarled, pointing at him. The young female scrambled after him. He fell, scrambling along like an insect, to a little hole dug at the base of the wall. She was on top of him. He squealed like a pig, fighting as I approached.

Unceremoniously, I grabbed his ankle and dragged him out of the Lodge by his heel, ignoring his kicking and thrashing. The young female, keening with excitement, leaped around him, raining blows. I let her hit him, ready to strike her if she went too far.

We pulled him well past the Lodge, to a joining of two sheds. "Arrah," I snapped, pushing the female away. I let him go.

He scrambled, terrified into the corner, gibbering.

I squatted down on my haunches and let him gibber. The young female did likewise.

"Stampede?" I asked finally. I indicated his crippled body and flicked a piece of copper at him. He flinched as it hit him and dropped away. He stared at it.

He nodded. After a moment, he grabbed the coin.

I could almost imagine the beasts, passing over him, his trying to shelter himself, pulling into a screaming ball. Hooves shattering bones.

"Cull?" I flicked another copper.

"War," he said. "Upriver. I hid, fed on bodies. Healed."

I nodded slowly.

"When?"

"Four years ago, autumn runs."

"Arm?" Flick. He caught this one, squeezing it in his good fist. Even whole, I thought, he wouldn't have been very big.

He seemed confused that I was asking. It seemed to smother his fear.

"Five years," he grunted.

I waited.

"Dwarves. Not a war, just out. Find a band, fight. Dwarf has club, he hits,

bones inside go to pieces. Arm no good. Swells up heavy, big and black with blood. Blood turns poison.

Fire to stop poison, but it goes on. More fire. More poison.

Arm comes off. Burn flesh. Poison stops."

I hummed.

"Hide. Drink water. Eat bugs and rats. Dream and dream, like the Vampires. Get better. Come out. Still mighty."

"No," I said. "Never mighty."

"I was mighty," he said, "they remember, they feared to come close, even when I was full of poison."

"Not mighty," I shook my head emphatically.

He watched me, waiting for my next move.

"Who owns you?" I asked, flicking a coin.

"You do."

I grunted.

"Many masters," he said quickly. "Many skills. Clever hands. Sharp eyes. Groom and polish. Good sex, very easy. Don't eat much. Eat excrement. Easy to feed. Don't have to worry, not dangerous."

"Many?"

His head bobbed quickly, trying to guess what we wanted.

"Many. I'm a good slave. Masters have no complaint. I serve well."

"You stay in this Lodge only?"

He shrugged. "It's a place."

I nodded.

"I'm looking for an Arukh," I said. "Do you know him?"

He looked at me blankly. I tossed him a copper.

"Clever Arukh. Clever, clever. Male. Not too big, not too strong. Carries an iron knife, two edges. Very clever. Very dangerous."

"Clever," he said, licking his lips, "clever clever. There's a big female in Downriver, stays at the Troll, Iron Pants, lodge. Very clever. Very dangerous. They say things about her. Stories, all kinds of stories. Dangerous."

"Not the one," I grunted and shook my head conveying disinterest.

"Clever, clever, clever," he insisted. "She tricked the Dwarves into war. She raised up the Kobolds to their kingdom and killed their devil. She gambled with the high Gnomes, they say they won, but now they fear her."

I snarled with irritation.

"No, no," he said, cringing backward. "You want a clever Arukh, that's the one you want. They say-"

"Not the one I want," I snapped. "I want a male, not too big, with an iron knife."

"Iron knife?"

I grunted.

"No Arukh. No Arukh I've heard of has an iron knife. No male could keep it. Iron knife, a female would take it. A strong one, a clever one, like down at the Troll's-"

"Enough!"

"You want an iron knife, you go there. Not here. Only a clever Arukh would have-"

"Stop." I raised my fist in mock violence.

I sat and thought.

"Sex," I said.

"You want sex?" he brightened. He started flicking his tongue like a lizard, trying to stretch his body sinuously. I noted a knife scar running the edge of his tongue. "I do that. I do that good. I make no trouble. Do you both-"

He cringed as I raised my fist.

"Looking for an Arukh," I said again. "Male, not very big. Bad sex. He likes to cut."

"Lots of bad sex," he said, "many like to beat. Many like to bite and bleed. Some cut."

If he'd lived this long a cripple, I knew, he'd be very good at smelling them and staying away.

"Many cuts, not long, small and deep," I said. I mimed holding a knife, stabbing over and over again. "Many, many."

He stared at me, and shook his head.

"War," he said finally. "Battles. Sometimes, cut, cut, cut. Not sex. Blood fever."

"Not war," I insisted. "Sex. Stab. Many, many, many."

He stared.

"Maybe cut tongue. Maybe cut eyes out. Sex."

I paused.

"There," I indicated between his legs, he cringed, "cut out, cut away. Make new hole. Sex in hole. Wallow in blood and entrails."

His eyes widened. He squirmed, struggling with mounting terror. Abruptly he bolted. The little one, anticipating his move, was already on top of him. He squealed with terror, a keening sound. It was matched by her own gleeful cry as she began to beat him again.

"Stop," I said.

She froze. I remained squatting, watching them.

There was a slight panic in her eyes, as if she'd transgressed but was not sure how. His fear was mixed with confusion, terrified, every choice bad, every direction a nightmare... but right at that instant, no one was hurting him.

She got off him slowly, squatted on the other side, to watch and wait. Her eyes had gone bright again, all watchful and attentive. It was disturbing.

"No," I reassured him. "Not us. This is the Arukh we seek. Ever hear of an Arukh doing like that?"

"Many Arukh," he offered. "War? Blood fever? Hunting lust?"

"Just one Arukh, alone. Sex."

He shook his head.

"Nothing like that. Never seen an Arukh like that. Never heard of it."

I made a sour face.

"Maybe," he said desperately, "Arukh like that is in Downriver. Not around here. Go to Downriver."

I must have looked more and more irritated.

"Men cut like that."

"Men?"

"Horsemen." He went on desperately. "Heard about it. Horsemen, when they kill, they cut tongue, cut eyes."

"Sex?"

"No. After battle, fever over. They go to the dead. That's what they do. Death rituals. I've heard about it."

I grunted dismissively.

"This Arukh," I said, "male, not too big, not too small, bad, bad sex. Iron knife. Very clever. I want to find him."

I flicked a piece of copper.

"Nothing like that around here," he said. "Why you want to find something like that?"

"Around here," I insisted. "Where do I go to find something like that?"

"Other houses," he said, "Go to other houses. Arukh talk. Madness like that, you hear. Not here, then some other house."

A clever Arukh indeed, if he knew enough to hide his lust from other Arukh.

A thought occurred to me.

"Ever hear," I asked, "of bodies cut up like I said."

"Men-"

I cuffed him. He cowered, his eyes bright and scared.

"Bodies found, no battle, no fight, cut up, many wounds, eyes and tongue gone, sex carved out."

I stopped and tried to think. What else would show?

"Maybe Arukh, maybe Vampires. They disappear. Bodies appear, dropped or cast away. Maybe nobody sees killing, nobody hears of killing. They just find the bodies. You know anything like that?"

"I hear..." he said slowly.

I inclined my head, listening.

"No Arukh," he said. "I hear of no Arukh like that. But Vampires... Maybe Vampire bodies like that appear. It's men..."

Vampire bodies? I perked up, allowed him to see interest.

"Tell me about Vampire bodies?" I ordered.

"It's men. Men do it. That's what everyone says. Men."

"The Vampires," I snapped.

"A Daughter of the Hollow Bone line," he cringed, "others, I don't know. I only hear. I don't know much."

He kept on whining and cringing, crouching against the wall. I let him run on and run down.

"Arrah," I said finally. I tossed another piece of copper at him. He caught it. "You're a rich Arukh," I told him. "Very rich. Other Arukh will be jealous, maybe take it away, kill. Be clever, rich Arukh, maybe you live another year."

I stood and backed away.

"We're done with him," I said.

"Now Kill!" the female shrieked, leaping on him. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

I growled and kicked her away. She scrambled to her feet, hissing.

"Kill?"

"No kill," I snapped.

"No kill! No kill!" squealed the cripple.

"Take copper?" she asked. She'd taken my speech as an invitation. I sighed.

"No."

"I can. I can take it. No trouble. Easy."

I grunted irritably, rocking from side to side.

She glanced from me to the cripple and back again, looking disappointed.

"No," she said sadly.

"Why not?" she said suddenly.

We were wandering though the outer Kingdom, the cripple left far behind us. It was a tangled warren of fences and chutes and wooden sheds. Above our heads, water chutes ran here and there. Goblins clambered about up there, fixing things and running errands. In places, the water chutes leaked; I was drinking from a small leak, holding my head high for the water to spill down in my mouth. She was crouching several feet away.

"Arrah?" I coughed and stared at her, wiping my mouth.

"Why not?" she asked again. "The cripple?"

This was where the lower Vampires, the Dead Men and the Arukh lived, where the tanneries and slaughterhouses were. Nobody paid attention to us, so long as we were suitably submissive and stayed clear.

"Why bother to kill the cripple?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"It would have been easy," she said. "Very easy. We could have done it."

We began to walk along. She led, she knew the low kingdom. We couldn't go to the high Kingdom, of course. That would be death. But there were no Arukh in the high Kingdom, and no reason to go there.

"Is that a good enough reason to kill?" I asked. "Because you can?"

She grunted, her brow wrinkling with thought.

"And... because you want to?" she asked.

We came to a gathering of Tanners, old bent Vampires, wizened gaunt Arukh, a few humans, lean and bony, all taking smoke. I could see, by the way they maintained careful distances from each other, that they were not familiar with each other.

We waited patiently until someone passed us a small clay brazier. We lifted the lid, took smoke and sat. Some watched for a moment, but everyone was loosened by the smoke.

I listened to gossip. The talk was of war, of course. I waited. I wasn't about to start asking questions about dead Vampires in the middle of Vampire Kingdom, not where such questions would travel on their own.

Talk turned to these new men, the Horsemen.

"They are bloody fighters, I hear," I said finally, carefully. "I hear they like to cut."

That started the talk around about the atrocities of the Horsemen. Lurid fantastical stories about bodies mutilated on the battlefield gave way to other singular mutilations attributed to Men.

I offered small observations, letting others recall similar incidents, and listened carefully.

Among the Kobolds, Dwarves took the blame. Here among Vampires,

they looked at Humans.

Clever, clever my Arukh was.

Or perhaps they were all just very stupid. I thought about that for a second. Were they so bound by their hatreds and prejudices that when hurt, they could look no further than the usual enemy? There might be a use for that.

Then I thought sourly, my Arukh had found his use for it.

"I'm looking for an Arukh," I said finally. "Male, not too big. He carries an iron knife."

Nothing. Instead, the conversation drifted towards Trolls and iron.

I sighed and got up. The female came with me.

"Is it enough?" she said.

I grunted, quizzically, glancing at her. I had no idea what she was talking about. She began to lead us through the warrens.

"If it is easy to kill," she said, "kill it."

"The cripple?" I said, recalling her questions. "Why are you so hungry to kill?"

She grunted.

"He lives five years like that," I said.

She spat. "Live like slave, die like slave."

"Ah," I said, "slave."

She ducked her head angrily.

"I will not always be a slave," she said.

"You should not be one now, yet you follow me."

She rocked from side to side. I could almost hear her grind her teeth with frustration. My words upset her.

"Arukh live and die," I said. "We are young, we are slaves. We grow strong, tell ourselves we are free. We grow weak, slaves again."

Strains of the end of the Mermaids song ran through my mind, that voice, once powerful, now broken and limping, pausing to gather the shreds of its strength, before finally dying. I felt a chill.

"Not mighty?"

"Arrah?"

"He said he was mighty. You said he was not mighty. Never mighty?"

"If all he had was strength, he would have died. He wasn't mighty, he was clever to keep alive."

I glanced at her.

"You talked to him because you thought he was clever?" she said. "Not clever to be crippled like that."

"A strong Arukh," I told her, "doesn't care. A strong Arukh does what she wants, takes what she wants, pays no attention to other Arukh."

She shrugged.

"The cripple... all Arukh are stronger. To live, this one must watch all Arukh, he must pay attention and know them well."

I watched light dawn in her eyes.

"Aaah," she whispered softly. "To find an Arukh, you talk to him, rather than a strong one."

Strong Arukh don't talk. We beat the ground with our fists, and show our fangs and swing our heads side to side and then we charge.

I could just imagine trying to get information out of the grunting half-burned female that had confronted us at the Lodge. We'd still be grunting and spitting at each other now.

"Why do you want to find this Arukh?" she asked. "The one with the iron knife."

"He killed the Mermaid," I said with fierce resolve. "This must not be done."

I could tell from her blank look that she didn't understand. One killing was just the same as another to us. Perhaps I didn't understand myself. This killing was different, it was not right. It had a wrongness to it.

But if all killings are the same, perhaps all killings were not right?

I pushed the thought away.

We walked along quietly for a moment.

"He was just a cripple," she said quietly.

"You think you could live so long, crippled like that?" I asked.

She made a face.

"Eating excrement? Die first."

"Then perhaps you shall," I said.

"No."

"Arrah," I said, almost laughing at her, "you will defeat our fate."

"I will make slaves," she said firmly, "and make them stand before me. They will cripple, not me."

"Will they?"

"I will beat them," she said, "so they fear me above all."

I stopped and swung to face her.

"I had a master," I snapped. "Who I feared above all. Many times he beat me, and made me bleed. Many times he raped me. Many times he hurt me."

We walked along in silence for a few steps.

"I killed him," I said suddenly, "while he slept. I took a great big stone, and I crushed his head. I crushed it again and again, until he had no head."

"You were strong," she said, with something approaching satisfaction.

"I was twelve," I said. "I was small. He was big. He was mighty. He slept. I crushed his head."

I stared at her.

"You think slaves will make you safe. They won't. Sooner or later, slaves grow strong, and you will grow weak. Sooner or later you sleep. You sicken. Your back is turned to their knife. Then what?"

"I kill them first?"

She didn't seem all that certain.

"Or they kill you," I said. "Many masters are killed by slaves. Take a slave, sometimes you mistake it, think it's weak when it's strong. It kills you, because you have misjudged it. Misjudged strength, misjudged temper."

"Arrah," she grunted, trying to think.

"Where do we go?" I said.

"No slaves then?" she said.

We found another gathering, this time a martial band of Arukh. After the customary snarling, we exchanged gossip and moved on.

"Why didn't you want to kill the cripple?" she persisted.

She was so tiresome. She was like a dog with a bone: she couldn't let it go.

"It wasn't necessary."

"But it would have been easy."

I shrugged.

"You'll find," I said, "that there are many necessary things. If you don't need to do something, why do it?"

She cocked her head to one side, making a hiccing noise in her throat.

"Besides," I said, "he wanted to stay alive. He was good at it. He fought hard for his life, let him have it."

I shrugged.

Again I thought of the Mermaids song.

There was no reason not to kill, I thought. I should have killed him. She was right.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said finally. "You make too much noise," I said irritably. "You cry and you hiss, and you carry on. You scream and screech and you talk too much."

She cocked her head to the side, staring at me.

"Well, well," the Sergeant said. He was a heavy Vampire, almost fat. He was backed by a squad of Vampires, armoured and carrying lances. "A big strapping Krohn and a ripe little Horr. You wouldn't be trying to sneak off now?"

I cursed silently. We'd almost made it through the outer Kingdom.

"She talks to me," the young female announced proudly. I rolled my eyes for an instant as they looked confused.

"Noble Lord," I said ducking my head submissively, "we hear that the Lords pay well for fighters."

He cocked his ear, listening to the accents of my voice.

"Not from around here?"

"Trolls house, my Lord," I replied. "Iron Pants."

"That's a Dwarves hiring place," he said.

I shrugged.

"The Dwarves aren't hiring."

"Sackunessar?" the Sergeant said, a Vampire came forward, armoured differently from the others. The recorder. "We getting any from the Trolls Lodges?"

"There was a shipment from One Tusk's lodge this morning. We're starting to recruit there."

"We got separated," I said in explanation. The female nodded vigorously in confirmation.

"I think," the Sergeant said, grinning with almost Arukh- heavy fangs, "I think you like thieving better than fighting, that's what I think."

"We take nothing," I said, holding out my hands.

"Perhaps," he said, "the chance hasn't come. No one's complaining and I suppose this isn't the place for a hanging. Come along."

He turned. We had no choice but to follow; guards filed in behind us.

I cursed silently.

We heard the camp before we saw it, felt our chests vibrate with the beat of massive drums. Then the smell of roasting flesh and excrement.

The young female was quivering with excitement.

"You hear?" she said. "War!"

I heard. I'd been in the last war. I felt no strong urge to be in this one.

The camp came into view. For a second, it was just a corral of milling bodies, full of Arukh, Troll, Hobgoblins and Vampires.

The Sergeant took us to another Vampire at the gate of the corral.

"Another couple of strays," the Sergeant announced jovially, to a thin Vampire making marks on paper. "One Tusk Lodge, or Greasy Thumbs."

"One Tusk," the recorder said. "Registered?"

"I don't think so."

"Turn," the recorder ordered, "let us see your bare backs."

We turned and pulled at our leathers, exposing bare flesh.

"Not registered," sighed the Recorder. "One Tusk will want his commission on these. Hold still."

Something touched the small of my back. I leaped forward, turning.

"Just paint," the recorder said, holding a brush up. "Now give me your back, or swing from a rope."

The brush waved. I looked, farther over the compound, four Arukh hung by their necks from ropes. Two were dead. One struggled frantically in the noose. We could hear him suck each breath.

"For refusing paint?" I asked.

"For disobeying. You want to hang? We need to set a few more examples."

I turned. With a few strokes he marked a design on my back that I could not see or reach.

"After the battle," the Recorder said, "show your mark. We pay you."

"Arrah," I grunted sourly, pushing my armour into place. I could feel the mark smearing. The young female accepted her mark with more patience than I would have credited.

"There," the recorder said, "you want to eat, you go eat. You get weapons. You get armour. We'll put you through drills and assign officers."

I grunted, nodding.

"No fighting," he warned. "There'll be time for that after in the war. You fight here, you disobey here, you swing here. Understand?"

"Arrah," I said.

We walked in, past a band of Hobgoblins with ragged goblin armour. Furtive Goblins darted around, fitting and strapping Arukh into the clay and straw plating. The female stopped and began to select. My own mixed armour was better, I ignored it.

I wandered into the milling crowd, listening to the drums. A pair of Trolls were beating on a great skin drum wider than I was tall. I kept my head down, watching for iron knives.

Trolls walked through the crowd on their errands. I joined small groups as they formed and broke up, listened to the tense, breathless exchanges.

I looked up. A Troll strode by wearing a special harness on his shoulders. A Gnome rode him. The Gnome tapped the Troll, and he turned toward

me. The Gnome and I stared at each other for a second. Then the Troll turned again and moved on. I chewed my lip, disturbed.

"Get a weapon," someone said to me.

"Arrah?" I turned. It was a Vampire.

"Go get a weapon. You think you'll fight with teeth? That way."

He pointed. There was a group of Trolls dispensing weapons.

I walked over. I passed the hanging Arukh. As I looked up, the one who struggled caught my eye for a second, his face a mask of terror and horror. He was growing weaker. His companion loosed her bowels, shit dropping from between her dangling legs, her body settling into the stillness of death. His eyes glanced that way for a second, and he renewed struggling.

I shrugged and walked past.

"What do you want?" the Troll asked as I approached.

"You have knives?" I said.

He looked me over critically, noting my bronze knives.

"We have long knives, swords if you can use them well."

I couldn't.

"You have iron knives?" I asked. "I want an iron knife, not big, two edges. You have that?"

He stared at me, shocked.

Then he began to make a booming sound. I realized it was laughter.

"Arukh wants iron?" he boomed. "Good joke. Perhaps we should inscribe it too? Maybe you want an iron suit?"

I let him laugh.

"No iron knife for you," he said finally. "You can pick: Club, Lance, Sword, Sling, Bow."

I thought about it. We'd be facing Horsemen.

"Lance," I said.

He looked me over.

"You can use a lance? You have used lances before?"

"Yes," I lied. I'd seen them used. It couldn't be too hard.

"No," he said. "A big Krohn like you, a lance would be a waste. I'll give

you a club. Don't lose it."

Bastard.

"Arrah," I said, accepting it. "Thank you."

It was a sorry piece of wood, still green, with a cloth wrapped around one end for a handle.

"Drills over there," he said, pointing, dismissing me.

I looked over.

There was a forest of poles where instructors were demonstrating club techniques. They were trying to organize Arukh, to get them to move in formation, to attack as something more than a collection of individuals. They weren't having much luck.

I ignored it, and walked over to the stew pots.

I began to recognize individuals from Downriver. Several from One Tusk's Lodge, a few from Greasy Thumbs, even a couple from Iron Pants. We exchanged nods.

A Troll fished me a good chunk of meat from the thick stew, a heavy bone in the center of it.

I squatted near a circle. The half-burned female I'd confronted in the Lodge looked up at me.

"They got you too?" I said.

She shrugged.

"Arrah," she replied. "No matter, there are good places in battle and bad places."

One of the Arukh was telling a story. She turned back to listen.

"....and the Forest Gnome sits, and snicker snack, snicker snack, go the Dwarves, his head goes rolling. All the High Gnomes laugh and laugh. It is a good joke."

The Arukh chuckled.

"'He forfeits the high game,' says the High Gnomes. 'Who will play?' So the second Forest Gnome sits, his eyes rolling in fear, and snicker snack, snicker snack, go the Dwarves, his head goes rolling and all the High Gnomes laugh."

"The last Forest Gnome, he tries to run away, squealing in fear. The

High Gnomes laugh and laugh, it is such a good joke. They drag the Forest Gnome to sit in the gambling seat. The High Gnomes laugh at the Arukh who games, 'Arukh,' they say, 'who will pay you when the game is over?'"

"You know what she says?"

"What does she say?"

"She says to the High Gnomes, 'You will pay.' Then she sits in the gambling seat."

The Arukh around the circle roared.

"They do," another Arukh said loudly, "they pay. I hear. They come to her Lodge with gold, and she laughs at them, and flings it all over the Lodge. 'Take it back,' she tells them and laughs, as they look at all the Arukh and squeal in fear."

"Snicker snack, snicker snack, Dwarves fall dead," the storyteller continued, loudly emphasising his words. "'Let us play,' she says."

"Stupid story," I grunted, walking away.

"Not the way I heard it," an Arukh said behind me.

"How'd you hear it?" someone asked.

"I hear she's dead," someone else volunteered, "challenged a Shaman named Copper Thoughts in his own house."

Ears burning, I ignored them. Moving along, dipping in and out of knots of conversation. Most of the talk was of the war or battle. I didn't bother. The Arukh wouldn't know anything about the war, they'd just know about the dying.

I saw many males that might fit my description. None of them had an iron knife, or seemed especially clever.

Another Arukh was added to the gallows, a belligerent female who kicked and struggled until the rope jerked her into the air and she had to hold it to keep breathing.

A clever Arukh wouldn't be here, I thought sourly.

I glimpsed the young female from time to time.

As dusk fell, we were loaded into wagons. I followed the burned female.

"In with the Krohns," a Vampire drover said to me. I got on the wagon,

waiting patiently.

Most of the Arukh in my wagon were scarred older females. Horrors. We grunted at each other with subdued animosity.

"Rughk," another couple of Vampires mounted the wagon, too heavily armoured to ride. They were obviously low status. Officers for Arukh.

"We go into battle," he announced. "The Rippers and Hor'rs go first against the Dwarves. Then when the Dwarves tire, the Krohns and the Gnashers go."

"Only trouble," grunted the burned female, just loud enough for him to hear, "Dwarves don't tire."

"We can have one more hanging," the first officer snapped.

There was a soft chorus of grunts. There was just enough of a threat there to acknowledge. Not quite enough of one to respond to.

After a moment, the Vampires continued.

"We'll hold the Krohns back until the battle is joined, you look for places to attack, rather than go straight against Dwarf formations," the second officer said. He was older, more experienced.

"Any who don't like that, you can go to the Hurr'rs and the Zults and attack head on."

Nobody in the wagon volunteered. We were all old and experienced enough not to want to face Dwarve legions head on. Let them split apart a little, so they no longer stood shoulder to shoulder. That was a little different.

The wagons lurched into motion.

We were off to war.

I heard the battle before I saw it, heard the screams of horses and beings, the clash and thud of weapons, the stench of blood and bowels. We waited, shuffling nervously, snarling at each other, hearts pounding.

A Goblin lit a bronze brazier near us, fanning a fast flame then smothering it until the brazier was heaped with glowing embers.

A Vampire on horseback rushed forward.

"Ready the Krohnns," he ordered. His horse danced before us.

The Goblin nodded.

The scarred female walked to the brazier, filled her hands with red glowing coals and brought them to her face.

I stared, my guts heaving as she rubbed the embers down the sides of her head. The odour of burning flesh and hair filled the air as others did the same.

Her eyes rolled. She twitched as embers slipped under her armour, smoked as the coals burned slowly on tars she'd smeared onto herself. Her nose ran freely and her eyes rolled as she heaved and gasped.

"Ar Ar Ar," she grunted, gasping and reeling with pain. Blood ran down the side of her face where she'd torn her scarred eyelid. She trembled violently. I backed away.

A Goblin offered me the brazier. I shook my head. Not all the Arukh took the fire to themselves.

"War," the burning woman said. "Warwarwar."

She paused.

"WARWARWARWAR..."

Around me I could hear other grunts and chants.

The burning ones shook and grunted and roared, nearly mad with pain and rage.

The horse whickered nervously, shivering with fright. The Vampire fought to hold it.

"Krohnns follow," he yelled. "Hurr'rs come after, protect the backs."

The horse wheeled, rushing into the battle, as much fleeing as leading the screaming horrors behind them.

The battlefield was already disintegrating into chaos. The Vampire lead us against a battered phalanx of Dwarves. They screamed as the burning Krohnns tore into them, snapping their lances and scattering their shields. We who followed behind the mad rush, clubbed and stabbed at the Dwarves within the torn phalanx, preventing them from cutting down the burning Krohnns.

Behind us, a mixed force of Hobgoblins and Vampires and lesser Arukh poured into the wound in the Phalanx until the Dwarves formations

began to break apart. As they did, Vampire cavalry swept in to cut them to pieces.

Suddenly, before me, the scarred female I had known, screaming and smoking and covered with blood, appeared. Her eyes wild, she rushed at me, knowing nothing but killing.

I got out of the way, rushing into open ground. She found someone closer to kill.

I looked around wildly. Fighting was everywhere. The phalanx had fallen, but other formations of Dwarves and Humans coalesced. Horsemen and Vampires on horses swept back and forth.

I raced for broken ground, ruins of buildings and piles of rubble, that promised an illusion of safety.

A screaming Dwarf came rushing at me. I hit him with my club, the impact rattling both our bones. His scream choked and he went down.

The air was thick with blood and smoke, the thunder of hooves and the cries of beasts and beings. Three Dwarves with lances spotted me. I darted away, looking desperately around for help. One of the Dwarves feinted with the lance. It glanced off my armour. I dropped the club, grabbed the lance just past the barbs and pulled. The Dwarf, startled, stumbled forward. I reversed, pushing the grip of his lance into his belly. I pulled and pushed again, twisting and dodging to avoid the others.

The lance came free in my hands. I swung it right and left, clattering on the other lances as I retreated. I reversed the Lance and growled.

The Dwarves came on, spreading on either side of me. I backed away. I'd seen Arukh killed on those lances, impaled and held while they bled to death.

I growled and shook the lance at them as they came on. I bobbed my head ranging them, but they kept moving back and forth, sliding further apart.

I roared and rushed the one on the left. He backed away quickly, as the other came at me. I backed away. Now they were even wider apart. If I rushed one, the other would be behind me.

"Arrah," I whined.

I stopped and squatted, waiting to see what they would do.

They paused and glanced at each other. I watched. The Dwarf on the left came in wide, screaming, his lance raised as he scuttled further left and inwards.

I roared and turned, retreating. The other Dwarf was right behind me, rushing in silently. I dodged his lance, aiming my own low. I caught him in the gut, the barbed head of the lance burying itself in his stomach and catching there. He fell back heavily, sitting down, legs splayed, holding the lance. His hairy face was suddenly pale.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," he whispered. He looked horrified.

I let go my lance and sprang forward, expecting any moment to feel the other Dwarf's spear in my back. I leaped past the fallen Dwarf and whirled around, crouching against the sitting body.

"Arrah," I grunted, gulping air.

The last Dwarf faced me with his lance. He grinned, exposing craggy teeth as he closed in. I reached for the dying Dwarf's lance, where he'd dropped it. The grinning Dwarf feinted, driving me behind the body before I could grab it.

"Abomination!" he grunted. "Coward! Come out from behind my brother and die."

I hissed at him, trying to think what to do.

He feinted again, working his way around to the side, confident of killing me.

I waited for his next feint. When the lance jabbed at me, I lifted and hurled the body of the dying Dwarf, catching the tip of the lance. He cursed. That was all I needed. Even as he pulled the lance free of his fallen comrade, I was past the barbs. I pushed the lance shaft down, burying its head, snapping it with my weight, and rushed him.

"Who dies?" I screamed, stabbing at him. My first blow turned on his armour. He raised his hands to defend himself. I stabbed again, feeling the knife bury deep in his flesh, I twisted the blade as I pulled it out, and stabbed and stabbed again. He kept fighting, and in panic I kept stabbing.

"Who dies now? Who dies now?" I screamed as blood poured from his mouth and his hands dropped. The light went out of his eyes.

I stopped, gulping air and looking around.

I could hear fighting all around me. But a short wall, relic of some building, blocked much of the sight of it. I paused, trying to gather my wits and steady my pounding heart.

I crawled over to the wall and looked. Out in the clearing it was a contest between horses; Humans on horses, and Vampires on horses; sweeping back and forth. Battalions of Dwarves poured in with their lances, and the Horsemen drove the Vampires up against them.

Dwarves died, crushed and overwhelmed, but while they fought the Vampires, the Horsemen pushed from behind. Vampires died. I watched as Horsemen chased down and clubbed dismounted Vampires. The battle swept back and forth, churning the open grounds into a killing field, thick with torn flesh and spilled blood.

Most of the ground fighting was among the wrecked buildings and ruins scattered around the commons. Here Dwarf fought Arukh, and Human fought Vampire on foot. A desperate dance of grunt and thrust and blood.

I tried to spot a powerful band near me, something I could join for a measure of safety.

In the distance, a Shaman strolled, resplendent in beads and bells, he held his pipe out before him. Copper Thoughts? No, some other.

A Human came around the wall. I gutted him before the surprised look left his face.

I stared at him for a second, looking at his dead face, still young and childlike, his jaw slack exposing stained, unnaturally flat teeth. Humans were not made for war, I thought suddenly. Perhaps he'd just been looking for a place to hide. A place to be safe from the killing.

I shook myself, pushing the thoughts away.

He had a short sword. I took it, judging it to be more serviceable than the lances. No shield. I took his cloak. Perhaps I could use it to divert the enemy while I came at them.

I had to get out of here. More, Humans or Dwarves, would come, I was sure of it.

I searched for a way out of the fighting. This was howling madness. I didn't want to be here. I wanted to go back to where killing was intimate. To places of desperate, single struggles in dark corners.

I scanned my surroundings, trying to place the fighting Dwarves and Humans, the strongest bands. Finally, I headed right, the way I'd come.

I skirted around a couple of fights. Once I came close enough to stab a Human in the back. When some of his companions, Dwarf and Humans, turned at me, the Vampires they'd been fighting leaped. I backed away, retreating from the death struggle.

I ran past a dead Human. Not a soldier, his throat cut, he'd died hands pressed to neck, trying to hold back the blood. I knew him. I paused a second, trying to place him.

The meat vendor. The meat vendor who'd had such opinions of the war. He'd probably been trying to get away when it had caught up with him.

Here and there, whole buildings stood. Merchant houses, apartment blocks. Fortified and full of tense residents, hoping that the battle raging around wouldn't claim them.

I wished I was inside one of them now.

I stopped and crouched behind a mound of rubble, gulping air, and thought.

Or on top of one.

I looked around. A Dwarf came screaming at me, club raised. I roared at him and sprinted away as he braced himself for a charge that didn't come.

The closest building was four stories, and looked to be Dwarf residences. No.

Back the way I'd come was a merchant's warehouse. Smaller, but with a sloping roof that offered no concealment.

I stopped before I was winded. The Dwarf came up after me, expecting to club a panting, helpless Arukh. I waited motionless until he was almost upon me, then I sidestepped his rush and let his swing carry him into my sword. The blade caught in his ribs, nearly pulling it from my grip as he collapsed.

I glanced around instinctively, to see if I'd been observed. But if I had, no one cared. No one else was coming at me this instant.

Halfway around the edges of the battle I spied what I was looking for. A moderate sized house, three stories, flat roof, crudely fortified. I could see places where balconies and stairs had been torn away from the exterior.

Mixed residence, I judged, different peoples lived there, crowded by poverty.

I began to work my way towards it.

I came upon the young female spattered with blood, in a small band with two Hobgoblins. She'd found a sword somewhere, a long piece of bronze, more club than blade. It was a Troll sword by the look, almost as long as she was. Grinning, she wielded it like it was a part of her. They were hacking up a dead Dwarf. I could see the remains of cheap Goblin armour. It had blundered into them and never had a chance.

"Arrah," I bellowed. The female looked up, panting hard, grinning with battle lust.

"This way," I pointed at the building I wanted. "We go this way."

I waited to see if she understood. For a second, her eyes glittered bright and animal, then she glanced at my finger. She followed its direction to the building.

"That way," I repeated.

"Arrah," she nodded, and headed off. The Hobgoblins followed us.

She was much more tired than I was. I could see that from the way she kept stopping, from the way her sides heaved. Good. If there was trouble, someone come after us, I could sprint away and leave her behind to deal with it.

The Hobgoblins were in better shape. We were stronger, but tired faster. They lasted longer. Had she begun to rely upon them? Let them fight while she marshalled her strength for killing blows? If so, she was cleverer than I'd credited her.

Two Humans appeared. She fell back, letting the Hobgoblins contend with them. As they fought, she came in on the side, cutting one of them down. Then they went at the other Human who died beneath flashing blades. One of the Hobgoblins went down with him, his gut opened, intestines spilling out.

As it kicked, the remaining Hobgoblin cut its throat. It mumbled something in Goblin tongue.

The small female hacked at the Humans' bodies. She smashed a head

open, popped an eyeball in her mouth. She glanced at me, as if seeking approval.

I grunted, nodding my head.

"We go, travel fast," I told her.

She swallowed and followed me. The Hobgoblin followed her.

We detoured around several large fights. Twice we encountered single Humans or Dwarves who weren't interested in fighting us. I had to stop the little Arukh from pursuing. Once, we came face to face with a trio of Dwarves. We stared at each other for a second, both groups measuring our chances and not liking them much, and then sidled carefully past each other.

"Arrah," the young female called after them, her nostrils flared with bloodlust.

Fool.

At least she hadn't started anything I would have let them finish for her, I thought sourly.

Finally, we reached the building. Wary eyes stared at us from the corners of shuttered windows. I made Goblin, Hobgoblin, Kobold, Human, Dwarf. A very mixed group.

I circled the building, looking for the safest way up. Come close to a window, and there'd be a knife waiting. I examined the crude stonework of a corner, looking straight up.

I placed my hand on a corner, gauging it.

"This way," I grunted, and scrambled straight up. I hugged the side of the building, my face against stone. My fingers digging into minute ledges and crevices around stone. Hauling myself up by sheer strength.

I heard scratching below me, as the Hobgoblin and the female climbed up after me. The Hobgoblin cursed and kicked but hung on and climbed carefully. I could hear the female puffing below. Did she have enough strength to make it?

I clambered over the ledge, falling heavily onto the roof and gulping air.

An astonished Dwarf stared at me, he held a crude sharpened stick.

"Get off," he barked automatically.

Behind him was another Dwarf, an old female, I could tell by the cut of

the beard, a trio of Hobgoblins, another Arukh, and a Traditional Vampire.

"What?" I asked, sitting up and bracing myself against the ledge.

"More of them, Tcharok," the female Dwarf said. "Now they'll all come. We'll lose everything."

"These yours?" the Dwarf asked, jerking his head towards the traditional Vampire.

The traditional Vampire shrugged. "I didn't call them. Do as you please."

"Get off my roof," the Dwarf bellowed, he looked past me. "You too."

I stood, the Hobgoblin pulled itself over. Below him, I could hear the young female squealing in terror as she lost her grip. Abruptly, the Hobgoblin stiffened, and let out a cry. It slipped rapidly down.

I grabbed it. I needed an ally. I felt extra weight. The female, when she lost her grip, had grabbed for the Hobgoblin. She howled her terror below us.

The Dwarf rushed me, hitting with the stick. I kicked at him, almost pulled over by the weight that held me. I felt the Hobgoblin's arm jerk out of joint. I braced myself and heaved, hauling the Hobgoblin over. The female let go to grab the ledge of the building. I pushed the injured Hobgoblin at the Dwarf.

The female gasped, trying to pull herself over. Her strength was fading fast. I grunted and hauled her over the ledge.

We knelt there, crouching and gasping for air. The Hobgoblin backed up to us until we made a sorry little knot.

"We'll go," I gasped. "We'll go. Just leave us be, and we'll go away."

"Go away now," the Dwarf insisted shaking his weapon at us.

Not a fighter, I decided. But still, he might kill somebody accidentally if he attacked.

The Hobgoblins behind were obviously with him. They glanced nervously from us to the other Arukh and the Vampire. Those stared back unconcerned.

"Do as you please," the Vampire said.

"We don't need to fight," I said desperately. "We fight, some of you die. Then maybe it's different for them."

I indicated the Vampire.

"Then maybe you are few enough, weak enough that they do what they want."

"Oh," said the Dwarf, "what do they want?"

I shrugged.

"We won't fight," I said. "We'll go away. Just let us rest."

"Until you're strong enough to attack?"

"No," I said. "We won't attack."

I gulped air. The longer he hesitated, the harder it would be for him to attack. Hesitation was like a cut, it drained the strength from your limbs.

"Get off my roof," he snarled, "or we'll throw you off."

I stared, gauging him.

He didn't have the courage to attack. Not unless he worked himself up to it.

"Oh shut up," I snapped suddenly. "We aren't a danger to you. We're tired and we just want to get away from the mess out there."

I jerked my thumb.

"You want to fight?" I snarled. "Go out there and fight. You want to fight, make noise, spill blood, give them a reason to be interested in this house? Leave us in peace and we'll go away."

I glared at him. Daring him to push us further.

"Mercy," the Hobgoblin with us begged.

The little female just gasped for air and watched us.

One of the Hobgoblins behind the Dwarf grunted. He glanced back over his shoulder.

I could see him calculating his support. Killing an Arukh was one thing. Everyone despised Arukh. To murder a Hobgoblin begging for his life, that might upset the household.

"We have money," I said. "We'll pay."

He shifted from side to side, almost like an Arukh.

"All right," he said. "You'll pay. You'll make no trouble, or you go over. You do what I say, or you go over."

"Fine," I grunted and grinned at him.

He scowled. I kicked the Hobgoblin.

"Give him money," I ordered.

The Hobgoblin clumsily felt around for its purse. It was its good arm that was disabled. I took the purse and tossed it to the Dwarf.

He examined it.

"Not much," he grunted, but he didn't push it.

I allowed myself to relax.

The female Dwarf came forward.

"Would you like some bread?" she asked.

I grunted.

The Vampire came over and knelt beside the Hobgoblin. I recognized her. She looked up at me and grinned.

"Have you journeyed by water again?" she asked.

"No," I replied confused.

"You will. It is half your journey."

"Piss off," I said, irritably. I'd nearly been skewered a dozen times, I had no taste for mystic riddles.

She turned back to the Hobgoblin, touching his dislocated arm. The Hobgoblin whimpered.

"I see this," she said. "It is very common. A riding accident. Easy to fix."

She called the other Hobgoblins over and had them hold it down, covering its mouth. Grabbing the injured arm, she twisted it. The Hobgoblin convulsed, uttering muffled yelps. The Vampire pushed on the body.

The young Arukh looked at me nervously. I shrugged.

I noted that she'd somehow managed to hang onto her sword. How had she dragged that unwieldy heavy thing with her? And why? She'd almost not made it, that sword might have been her death. What she'd do with it on a crowded rooftop, I had no idea. For most purposes, it was not a practical weapon.

With an audible crunching noise the shoulder settled back in place. The Hobgoblin whimpered and then relaxed as the others loosened their grips.

"What are you doing here?" I asked the Vampire, as she looked up at me again.

"I watch," she said. "I observe and understand. This is what I do. This is a good place to do it."

"A safe place," I said. "It's hard to dream when someone is trying to cut your head off."

She glanced at the young Arukh with me.

"Is this yours?" she asked.

I grunted.

The young Arukh simply stared.

"She has her own journey," the Vampire said. "But not by water."

The young one seemed confused.

She went back to watch the battle. As we stared, she paused from time to time to flirt with the Goblins. The Dwarf and the Arukh watched the battle.

The young one kept staring at the Vampire.

"Traditionals," I explained.

She looked blank.

"I heard a story once," I told her, "about a wise Dwarf that sat and thought. A Vampire passed it riding on a horse. The Vampire said 'Hello.' For three days and three nights the Dwarf thought upon the Vampires word. Finally, another Vampire passed the same way, on horse again. The Dwarf said 'Hello.'

"The Vampire looked up and grinned at the Dwarf and said, 'I see that you have met my sister.'"

"What?" the young Arukh asked, her brow wrinkling in confusion.

"It is the way of Vampires," I said. "Nothing is ever simple, everything means something else. The simplest things have many meanings."

She stared at me as if I was mad.

I ignored her.

Beyond us, there were the sounds of battle, the thunder of horses, clatter of weapons, the screams of injured and dying. Every now and then a breeze would lift the scent of blood to us.

The Hobgoblins brought up Goblin meats. I traded one of the young Arukh's knives for meals. Then a game of bones started among the Hobgoblins. I left them and the young Arukh absorbed in the game and crawled over to the Vampire and the other Arukh.

"Like wolves," the Arukh grunted. She was a scarred female, missing an ear and two fingers. The accent of the City Vampires was strong with her. She'd been with them a long time.

I jumped and stared at her. She glanced at me curiously, and then went back to watching the horsemen.

"Wolves?" I asked.

As I watched, I could see it. The Horsemen were butchers. They killed horses as often as Vampires. They struck many times, tearing their foes to pieces, often continuing to strike after death.

"Arrah," she grunted. "They ride together, fight together. Look. They are like Wolves, hunting together as one."

Not what I was thinking then, her meaning was different.

We watched as two Horsemen contended with a Vampire, their horses jousting back and forth, neither of them rode nearly as skilfully as the Vampire. They traded futile blows. The Vampire's skill was blunted by two combatants. A third Horseman rode in to attack from behind.

The Vampire sensed the new attacker, and tried to turn his horse to confront the intruder, but the other two harried him. The horse wheeled back against its adversaries. The third man shoved a lance into the Vampire's back.

The Vampire slid down the flank of the horse. Bleeding profusely, he still held on and tried to urge his horse away from the enemy. One of the Horsemen raised a club and slammed it down on the Vampire's head. The Vampire slid further from the maddened horse. The club, now shining with red gore came down again, and the Vampire fell away. The terrified horse bolted clear of the Horsemen.

The Human riders circled their mounts around the fallen Vampire, clubbing and stabbing at it. It lay there in a spreading pool of blood. They rode away searching for another fight. The whole contest had taken but a moment.

"Like wolves," I said.

"The Vampires," the woman said, "ride alone. They ride for coup and glory. Men ride not so well, but they ride together. They ride to kill."

"Arrah," I grunted thoughtfully.

Further on, we watched as a Shaman confronted a Traditional. The two circled each other gracefully, then the Shaman raised the pipe to his nose and snorted. Suddenly he was a whirling blur, and the Traditional was using all his skill to save his life. There was an abrupt halt, and then the Shaman was swinging the Vampire's severed head, chanting and dancing.

I saw other Shamans on the battlefield, strolling invulnerable and untouchable, exploding into killing frenzies. I didn't see Copper Thoughts.

Over and over, as we watched, Humans on horses would gather against a lone Vampire rider and bring it down. As the battle wore on, Vampire riders clustered together, and confused bloody skirmishes would break out.

There was something more. As I watched, it seemed that some of the Horsemen stayed away from the fighting. No. Not quite. Groups raced together, merged and broke up. Horsemen would ride toward knots and then ride away, shouting to each other.

It wasn't just skirmishing, I realized. The Humans were making patterns, riding and focusing their efforts, cutting the Vampires to pieces. I watched, trying to guess which ones were directing the horses, making the patterns.

There was an Arukh among the Horsemen.

He sat small in his armour, shouting and directing the horse riders, telling them where and how to attack.

I stared, trying to see him better. He was a smallish male with lanky limbs. He rode only a little better than the humans. He took off his helmet to wipe his brow, exposing a white hairless streak of scar along his temple.

An Arukh among humans.

Interesting.

"They will withdraw," the Traditional with us, said.

"The Humans are winning," I grunted. "They kill many Vampires."

"But many more still come," she answered. "Look."

She was right, for every Vampire that fell, two more rode in, whooping and counting coup. Only to be slaughtered themselves in minutes. But still they came, and the surviving Vampires, desperate and shocked, fought hard.

The Horsemen's patterns shifted, weaving into a retreat down narrow alleys, driving stolen horses with them. I watched their Arukh seem to direct their retreat. He was among the last bands to ride away. As he turned, he looked back to survey the battlefield. Our eyes met for a second, and then he was gone.

Wolf rider, I thought, suddenly.

"The Fair People have won!" the scarred female bellowed. "They have sent the Humans fleeing."

Had the Vampires won? I wasn't sure.

I saw a lot of Vampire bodies littering the streets. I saw dead horses, killed by Humans. I saw dead Dwarves and Arukh and Hobgoblins. I didn't see many dead Humans.

They'd fought, they'd killed many Vampires, they'd taken many horses, they'd withdrawn, suffering few losses.

I grunted thoughtfully.

"I count nineteen dreamers fallen," said the traditional with vague abstraction. By dreamers she referred to the traditional Vampires, not the City breeds.

"The Vampires," I said carefully, "are better riders. But the Humans are better fighters."

"There are only a few Horsemen. Vampires are as many as the beasts," the scarred Arukh said.

"Not if this keeps up," she replied, surveying the dead.

I stared at the Vampire.

We waited as the remnants of the fight petered out, and finally made our way through the building. As we crawled down stairs and passages, small faces watched us. Finally, we were out, three Arukh and a Vampire. The

Hobgoblin had vanished along the way. I wasn't surprised. The company of Arukh wasn't good for a lone Hobgoblin. They made decent eating.

"Tell me about your Troll," the Vampire asked suddenly.

"What Troll?" I replied evasively. "Iron Pants?"

She chuckled.

I glared at her.

"Tell me," she commanded.

"Nothing to tell," I said. "The Troll trapped, I trapped. We left each other alone. I watched the Troll. Nothing else to do. He talked out loud, went back and forth, did things. I watched. I listened. He was mad, he would sit at the fire, telling himself stories. I would watch where he could not see. Sometimes, when he was gone, I would sneak into his lodge."

"Once I saw him talk to Goblins. I went to them. I said it was not safe. I said do not speak to a Troll, they are dangerous. The Goblins just laughed. They are all dead now."

I paused, remembering the nest.

"He tried to kill me many times. He set traps for me, but I was always too clever. He caught me once, in a net trap. It was a harsh winter, and I'd been raiding his traps. He came with half a deer he'd killed, and found me in the trap. He looked at me and laughed. Then he put down the deer and went away to check his other traps. He left a knife behind where I could reach it. I cut my way free and stole the half of deer."

I laughed.

"Stupid troll," I said.

"He left the knife for you," she said, "and the deer. He cared for you, when you would not be cared for."

My laughter choked. I stared at the Vampire, thinking about it.

"There was a time," I said, "when he hadn't left his lodge for three days. I started to throw rocks at the lodge, to make him come out. But he didn't. I shouted and howled at him. It rained. He still would not come out. I told him I would steal all his traps, that I would burn his house. But he did not come out. I waited. I thought perhaps he is not there, perhaps he is sneaking up on me. But there were no signs. I went to his traplines, but there was no sign of him. I even went to the goblins. I went back to

his lodge and made a fire, right out in the open where he could see it. I was sure I would make him angry and he would come out to chase me away. But he did not. I waited and waited."

I didn't want to say any more, but found I could not stop.

"Finally, I went inside. The fire had burned down to ashes. It was cold. The Troll sat there in his chair. He was cold. There was nothing, no words, no stories. All gone, everything. Just meat now."

I looked away.

"I went outside and howled and howled."

"Finally, I made a fire in his hearth and cut him to pieces. I ate as much as I could, and what I didn't eat, I scattered among his traps."

"That is how I killed him."

I stared at her defiantly. She nodded giving me a secret smile.

"You ate well," she said eventually, "there is much Troll in you."

I cursed her.

She made no response.

Why did she care? Why was she interested?

We wandered over the battlefield, looting corpses.

I watched as the Traditional, her Arukh in tow, went among the wounded, both Dwarves and Vampire. She talked briefly with a Dwarf. A tourniquet had staunched the flow of blood from his ruined arm. If he survived, he would lose it. He was listless and replied indifferently.

She peeled back an eyelid, staring at it, made a gesture, and then walked away. We followed.

I glanced at the wounded Dwarf as we passed. He stared impassively at me. A Troll came and picked him up, slinging him easily over her shoulder as she bore him away.

Elsewhere on the field, I saw other Vampires moving among the wounded, swinging bronze medallions like the traditional we followed.

The Traditional knelt by an Arukh. It was a heavy set male, squatting back against the wall, eyes slitted. He drew in great sobbing breaths, and let it out in a series of small grunts. His body was shiny with sweat.

Hands futilely covered his ruined belly, loops of intestines slipping out from his fingers.

"Do you see the land of dreams?" the Vampire asked him.

He didn't reply, just let air out in little, pained grunts.

She touched him with two fingers and stood away. My blood ran cold. I'd been touched like that once, a long time ago.

I stepped forward, but too late. Her tame Arukh cut its throat.

"You're a Cull," I said, my voice trembling.

She turned to look at me, death eyes calm.

"I am called to choose," she said gently.

I stepped forward, and then stepped back, nervous, drawing a knife. The tame Arukh growled at me.

"Arrah," I grunted. I gulped air, involuntarily swinging from side to side. "Arrah, we will go now."

I turned and started walking away, my footsteps light. My skin crawled and twitched, sweating, the hairs of my body erect and tense.

Footsteps behind me. I turned. It was the young female following me, I was almost relieved. Further behind, were the Traditional and the tame Arukh. They stared but did not follow.

I grunted.

She was a Cull! I had spoken with, had ridden with a Cull! The knowledge seemed to squeeze the breath from my chest. My legs started to shake.

We walked in silence for a moment, heading toward the celebration camp. The smell of bonfires and burning flesh filled our nostrils.

"What was that?" she asked, skipping to keep pace with my rapid strides.

I glanced at her. How could she not know? How could she not feel it?

"Among the traditional Vampires," I said, "there are Culls. They are the ones who choose the dead. They touch you..."

I held up my hand, curling the fingers the way I remembered.

"Like this. And beast or Vampire... then it is your time to die."

I'd been touched like that.

How old? Perhaps four or five years. The herds had wandered to the edges of forest, and they'd taken me aside. There'd been another Arukh, the first grown Arukh I'd seen. The Cull had touched me on my forehead and they'd all walked away, leaving me with the Arukh.

Only afterwards did I come to realize that I was dead.

That in that touch, they'd killed me.

"A Cull chooses who is to die. Stay away from the Cull," I spoke intensely, with a shadow of fear in my voice.

She stared at me, her eyes bright with incomprehension.

Many Dwarves and Humans had surrendered. The Vampires held them for ransom price.

As smokey fires burned, the dead were hauled this way and that. Arukh and Hobgoblins raped and beat the shrieking captured.

Here among the clatter and argument of simple fighters, I began to relax.

I replayed the conversations with the Cull in my mind, trying to find new meanings within her words.

The small Arukh didn't like the camp. She cringed and tried to sidle away from the rape piles. She stayed close to me, as if my presence would protect her.

I watched indifferently, looking for signs of the strange madness that had been inflicted on Mira's body.

Nothing.

Here and there, corpses were violated. A slave Arukh, garlanded in Dwarves intestines danced for laughing masters. Here and there, solitary Arukh furtively cut strips from the flesh of dead enemies to eat later.

I asked questions.

"Arrah," a grizzled male told me, one of his ears was missing, healed over into a scarred lump of tissue, he bent his head so that his good ear was towards me. "These Horsemen like to kill. Cut, cut, cut they do. They stab a body many times, many of them. I've seen a lot of it."

A few had heard of mutilations that might resemble what I was looking for. They weren't found on battlefields though. The information wasn't especially helpful. Just a few more details.

From their words, the mad Arukh may have managed to take perhaps

seven Vampires. All since the Horsemen had arrived.

And the Horsemen had their own tame Arukh.

Interesting.

We wandered over to a naked Human. He was cringing, huddled into a ball, crying out as a couple of Hobgoblins beat him with desultory enthusiasm.

"Great Daughters," one of the Hobgoblins said, "help us. We are trying to think of things to cut off."

Their mouths were red dripping grins. The Human was missing a couple of fingers. Blood and shit oozed down his thighs, but he seemed intact there, merely used.

"Perhaps now," I said to the man, "you will not ride so stiffly."

They laughed.

He just cried out. "I don't..."

Grabbing the man by the hair, I shooed the Hobgoblins away and pulled him to his feet. A palm with but two fingers left to it slapped ineffectually at me.

"Tell me," I ordered. "Tell me of the Arukh who rides with you."

"I don't... I don't ride."

"Men ride," I told him, "I have seen them."

"Other men," he gasped. "Not me. Not my men. We're just farmers, that's all. Please, let me be."

"Tell me what you know of the Arukh."

"I don't know anything. We're just farmers. That's all. I just want to live. I'll go away and never trouble you."

I grunted irritably and shook him hard, almost losing him as whole clumps of hair tore loose in my hand. Blood welled up across his scalp as I let go and dug my fingers into a fresh handful of long hair.

The Horsemen that I had seen wore their hair in braids.

"Tell me about the Horsemen," I ordered.

"I don't know anything," he whimpered. "I don't ride. I don't. We're farmers. They came. They were cruel. They said 'We will rule now.' They punished and killed..."

He went on, begging and whining. I threw him back to the Hobgoblins.

"Mercy," he cried out to me. "Let me live."

I laughed.

"Mercy from Arukh? Arrah, man you deserve to die."

I stalked off. The smell of meat wafted in my nostrils. I realized that I was hungry. We headed for the cooking pots.

Small fires burned under Orc pots, meat and blood boiling together inside. Trolls supervised the pots. Trolls were fastidious, we'd have to relieve ourselves away from the fires.

I huddled next to a pot, holding out a piece of Dwarf breastplate as a makeshift bowl.

"You are not a good fighter," the Troll said, spooning chunks of meat onto the plate. "I watch."

I stared. He'd watched me?

"I watch many fighters. You are strong. That gives you one blow. You are fast. That gives you another. You are clever, which may gain you a third. But on the fourth blow, you don't kill. You die."

"I don't need four blows to kill." I grinned mirthlessly at him.

"Good for hunting, perhaps. The ambush. The strike from behind. The surprise attack. Leap and kill and run away," he shrugged. "No good in a war most times. No place to surprise, nowhere to run."

Damn, I thought. He had been watching me.

The little female stared at him, eyes bright. She was too clever, I thought irritably. He shouldn't talk like that in front of her. She'd find a way to use it against me.

"I did well enough."

He grunted.

"You were lucky. Maybe you're a killer. Maybe. You're not a fighter, and you're past the age where an Arukh can be trained."

Was that true? I wondered. Did we come to an age where we stopped learning? Where we just coasted on what we were and what we knew until something killed us.

"Not a fighter! Not a fighter!" the young Arukh screeched, almost

upsetting the Orc Pot. Other older Arukh grunted irritably, and drew away, cautious of maddened outbursts.

"Not a fighter!" she screeched at the Troll. Each word seemed to burst out of her separately, as if being spat. She seemed to gulp between the words, grunting each piece of speech.

"Fighting is nothing! All Arukh fight! All Arukh kill! All fight Arukh! All kill Arukh! Fight, fight, fight. I know fighting."

She pointed at me.

"This one fights! This one talks too! Talks to Mermaids! Talks to Kobolds! Talks to Gnomes! They talk to her. Not fight. Not kill. Talk!"

I winced, flushing hot. She was going into her madnesses again, that screeching talking madness that afflicted her.

She licked her lips, uncertain of how to continue. Shut up, I thought at her.

"I follow her. Clever Arukh. Watch talk. People fight Arukh. People kill Arukh. Not her. She goes to them, they talk. They come to her. Mighty! Mighty! I follow her, not because she kills. I follow because she doesn't kill."

We all stared at her, as she rocked back and forth. Her eyes rolled wildly. Words I'd said to her about the cripple, the experience of war, the last few days, all rolling around inside her, merging and erupting in bizarre fragments of conversations. Even the Troll was startled.

She barked once or twice, trying to put words together.

She made a whining noise deep in her throat, struggling to express herself. Then she pointed at me again.

"Gambles with Gnomes. Maker of War. Killer of Devil. Rescuer of children. Talks to many."

White anger flared through me, so deep and fierce I was paralyzed. I wanted to strike her dead, but could not move.

"Arrah," I snapped irritably.

They were staring at me now, not her. Worse and worse.

"Arrah," the big female grunted, her head bobbing. "Gambles with Gnomes."

"High Gnomes," another said.

"Arrah!" I snarled.

Getting to my feet, crouching warily. I rocked from side to side, sweeping my right arm in front of me. The metal of the bronze knife catching the firelight.

The Troll looked dumbfounded. The Arukh present stared at me with frightening intensity. I could not meet all their gazes.

I lowered my head.

"Kill one," I said growling, "kill two, kill three. Kill enough. I go. You follow, you die. One, two, three. Enough die."

I retreated, keeping my knife out, my face to them. The young female followed me. We moved away from the campfire. I watched warily as they stared at us. Sitting or standing.

I backed away until they were just a small spot of light, among other spots of light.

I stared at the young female. She sidled away from my glare, moving just out of leaping range, ready to bolt. She should. I should kill her. She was mad, too mad to let live.

"You wanted to say that," I said, "to the Troll in the lodge. You listened to them talk about you. They talked like you weren't there. Like you couldn't understand. And you wanted to say that."

She stared at me, eyes wide.

I spat at her.

"You couldn't. Words wouldn't come. You sit, it boils in you. His words, over and over. You want to hit Troll, hurt him. But you can't. You pull words, putting them together in your head, to speak to the Troll. You make them hold together in your head, thinking about how you will say them to the Troll. But Troll forgets. Words have no place to go. They burn and burn, like they want to get out on their own."

"That's it?" I asked, "Isn't it?"

She licked her lips, swallowed, moistening her mouth, and nodded once. Jerkily.

"You know," she said, her eyes bright and burning. "You know everything."

I knew madness when I saw it.

"I say it good?" she asked, as if seeking approval.

I thought about it. She'd left behind a confused, startled band of Arukh. They hadn't understood a bit of it.

To them, it was just a bizarre insane outburst, like we all did now and then.

Maybe this was what our madness was, a collection of maddened rages against ancient hurts, all but forgotten but still aching. It seemed suddenly a sad and tiresome thing to be Arukh.

"You follow me because I talk to Kobolds?" I asked, the sheer, random pointlessness of it amazed me. She might as well follow a dog because of the way it lifted leg.

Her head jerked, she nodded rapidly, as if relieved that I understood.

I shook my head.

"You are mad," I said softly. "You are broken inside, in your head."

She looked disappointed.

Mad, simply mad, I thought. I wanted to drive her away from me, but was suddenly certain that would do no more than provoke another strange outburst sometime later.

Perhaps, I thought, I should just kill her.

But I'd missed my chances. She was too wary around me now.

"It's just talk," I said softly. "No magic. No power."

"Arukh don't talk," she replied enigmatically.

She'd done a good enough job of talking herself.

I grunted.

"You're like a strange bug," I said irritably, "rushing along full of mindless purpose. You pick up useless things and turn them over and over. Its all meaningless and worthless. You are meaningless and worthless."

"Go away," I snarled at her.

She shrieked, and leaped in a circle, twisting, her face contorted into a strange mask of despair. Screeching and weeping, she ran away.

Other distant Arukh looked up curiously.

I stared as she vanished, listened to her howls of pain and anguish fade.

What did she want from me?

The Mermaid's song crept into my mind, again I heard the strains of the child Ara, lonely and aching.

What a strange pathetic mad thing she was.

We all were.

I walked away from the camp alone. I approached a bloody body near where we'd sported with the Hobgoblins.

It was still breathing shallowly.

I glanced at it, and then, triggered by a sense of familiarity, inspected it more closely.

It was the Human I had spoken to. The Hobgoblins had tired of their sport for a bit. No matter, they would return to him.

I kicked him, rolling him over. I could tell by his breathing that he wasn't unconscious, only pretending. He still had one eye, one ear. His long hair was missing, his scalp shining raw patches where it had been pulled out. Most of the toes were gone from one foot, two fingers fingers missing on each hand. His genitals were intact. I smelled semen, blood and shit. All his.

His body had spurted as they used him. His genitals betrayed him. A good joke. They'd save those parts of him for last, but they'd cut that away too.

In some way he reminded me of the meat seller who had died on the battlefield. Humans, I thought, no good at war. Stupid creatures.

On impulse, I grabbed his ankle, twisting it. I heard him suppress a grunt of pain. I dragged him off into the night with me.

Eventually, I got bored and dropped him. There wasn't really anything I could have from him that would justify the bother.

He lay there, limp and bleeding, breathing shallowly. I nudged him with my toe. He gasped, and then went back to pretending unconsciousness. He wasn't fooling anyone.

"You are no good for fighting, Man," I told him. "Best to stay away from it. This is not your place. Go far from here, if you can, and grub in the dirt."

He breathed shallowly, still pretending.

"Arrah," I grunted finally, and walked off.

In a half dozen steps, I'd forgotten all about him.

"Hai, Arukh!"

A Goblin girl trotted after me. I kept walking.

"May you die quickly by another hand," she said, using the traditional Goblin address for Arukh.

I glared at her. Usually this thing was said in the company of a great many more Goblins.

"You press your luck, little sister," I told her. "Go away before I notice you."

"Like you noticed the Mermaid?"

I stopped.

I turned slowly, so she could understand I was giving her my full attention. As I turned, my eyes searched the surroundings, looking for an ambush.

She stood back, just out of pouncing range. I wasn't concerned. I could catch her on a straight dash. Likely that she had some bolthole prepared.

I squatted carefully, my muscles rippling. Ready to spring.

"What is it that you know about the Mermaid, little one?"

She grinned and danced before me, taunting. She was a Wild Girl, I could tell by her clothes. Not one of the Mothers Handmaidens.

"A Mermaid dies, a Mermaid dead, a monsters deed, a monster hunts, who's to say its not all the same."

She threw a bird's egg at me. I caught it and threw it back at her, roaring and leaping, but she was already gone. I leaped upon the spot where she'd been, and then again, but she turned left or right, evading my every leap and disappeared under the foundations of a building.

I snarled and kicked dirt into the hole.

I settled back to wait.

"Slow death by my hand," I snarled into the hole.

Something pelted the back of my head. I spun, reaching behind to feel. Another bird's egg.

A Goblin girl, dressed identically, but to my eye not the same individual stood a good distance away. Another Wild Girl.

"You shame the Mother," she said.

"Is that the best you can do," I growled. I scraped the ground for a handful of pebbles and flung it at her.

I heard a scabbling behind me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the first Goblin girl scramble out of the hole. I roared and lunged at her, just missing, my fingers touching the edges of her tunic.

I felt something strike at my knee, and almost crumbled. I swung, catching the second Goblin girl and hurling her through the air.

I hobbled after her, my knee aching.

"Come here," I snarled.

I was terrifically angry. But there was more. They knew something, that much was clear. I would have them and know what they knew.

I roared and leaped, and leaped again, but always, they managed to stay just out of my reach. Finally, I blocked them from a warren and trapped them in a boxed alley, the buildings slow and close together so they had no escape. I'd reined in my temper by that time.

"Little sisters," I said puffing, as I advanced down the alley towards them, "tell me what you know of Mermaids."

"A short life to you, Daughter," came a male voice behind me. "And a quick death by some other hand."

I recognized the voice. Not the speaker, but the race. Hobgoblin. I stiffened.

"That's more courtesy than an Arukh merits." Another voice, more guttural but with Hobgoblin lilts.

I glanced at the Goblin girls. Whatever they were doing, they'd led me here on purpose.

"A poor trap," I blustered, easing to put my back to a wall. "You've left no place to cut from behind."

I had a good look at them. My heart sank. There were over a dozen of them. Expensively armoured, adorned with sharp weapons. One among them was twice the size of the others, a female as large as I.

"Arrah," I said.

"Rot you," she said, hers was the guttural voice, "say that to me again and I'll rip out your tongue."

Involuntarily I bobbed my head.

"Mind yourself," she snapped, "I know your ways and I know what that means. Do that again and die."

The Wild Girls moved forward. I growled and gave a lurch in their direction. They squealed and backed up against the end of the alley. I would not allow them to be safe.

The Hobgoblins were advancing down towards me. I studied them, sliding down the alley away from them, careful to keep my back to the wall.

Well armed. Their weapons were good bronze, finely crafted even to my eye. Between them, they held an assortment of specialized weapon such that they might deal with any situation. I saw axes and hammers, swords and stickleblades, even things for which I knew no name.

They were very, very good.

Much better than those Hobgoblins who'd attacked me outside the lodge. These were not the same at all. These had been clever enough to draw me into a trap.

I glanced at the walls quickly. The buildings were only two and three stories. I could scramble up the side in an instant. But in that instant I'd fall with a dozen pieces of bronze in me.

"Quick death by some other hand," I said, "that's what the Mothers say."

The two Goblins made a move, I was close by now, and froze them with a snarl.

"Slow death," the big woman rumbled, "by my hands."

"Arukh aren't easy to kill," I growled desperately. "Goblins die first."

The Goblins keened in fear.

We waited.

"Father," I said finally, addressing the leader, "there is no war between us."

"Against the Ara," the big woman said, crouching a little as if to spring.

“All the world makes war. You are an abomination in the eyes of the Mothers. No one wants you in this world.”

The unfairness of it welled up in me.

“Am I to die then?” I asked desperately. “Tell me why? Tell me whose hand is set upon my death? Copper Thoughts?”

“You are Arukh,” the woman said as if in answer.

“Not enough,” I replied. “Not enough. Arukh are everywhere. Why me?” I was thinking. Thinking quickly.

“All Arukh are the same,” the woman said, “that’s why they have no need for names.”

They had more than enough strength to take me. Why did they hesitate? To save the girls? Why risk them at all? Why lure me only to kill me? There’d be easier ways. They wanted something from me.

“No,” I said quickly. “We talk. Not fight. Maybe not need fight. Goblins live. Hobgoblins live.”

I watched them carefully.

“Hobgoblins live. Arukh dies,” the female said.

Despite her words, they still didn’t move. She didn’t move.

“Arukh never die alone. Talk instead,” I insisted.

No answer. Was I wrong?

“We talk,” I said desperately, “I give you Goblin lives for that.”

“Who trusts the Arukh with lives?” the woman asked, repeating an old Goblin proverb.

She was the hardest; I could see that. The others weren’t quite so determined. I stared at the one I took for leader. He seemed to give the faintest nod.

They were waiting for me, I realized. Waiting for me to show them that I was someone they could talk to.

“Proof,” I said abruptly. I glanced at the Goblin girls, not two arms’ lengths from me now.

“One of you go. Just one. The other goes after talk.”

They both scrambled. I leaped, caught them both, dragged one back with

me. I held her underfoot as she shrieked with fright. The other I released to scamper to safety.

The Hobgoblins had moved in on me. I glanced to the right. I could get a few feet towards the corner, and then I'd have to fight.

"Talk?"

"No," the female snapped, "kill."

She wasn't the one they looked to, though.

I stared at the leader. He turned his head from side to side at me, the way Hobgoblins do. Finally, he backed up a couple of steps and squatted.

"Talk," he said finally.

"Kill!" the woman insisted.

"Talk."

They all backed off, squatting down, weapons ready but not raised.

"Why did Copper Thoughts send you?" I asked. Copper Thoughts was my best guess.

The leaders brows wrinkled. That had surprised him.

"Copper Thoughts is a Human Shaman," he said. "We serve the Mothers. We are the Brave Tohkzahli."

I'd heard of them. They were very, very good.

"Is this the Mothers' will?"

A hesitation.

"Yes."

Liar, I thought.

He hadn't expected that question either. The hesitation told me that whatever they were doing, they were doing it on their own and not because the Mothers had told them to.

What then? I wondered. If they lied about something that simple, they weren't likely to tell me anything more than the Mothers' verities. If it their purpose was wrapped in deceit, they might well try to kill me.

I shook my head with frustration. Try coming at it from another direction.

"Did you kill the Mermaid?" I asked bluntly.

It might be just possible. Hobgoblins were barely big enough for it,

though I couldn't make the madness of the attack match what I'd heard of the Brave Tohkzahli.

The question shocked them. I saw them glancing nervously from one to the other, confused.

Good. On strange territory they might react with something more than proverbs.

"No."

"That one," I pointed to the Goblin who'd scampered behind them, "spoke of the Mermaid."

They had enough discipline not to look back. Damn them.

"Why?" I asked.

"Arukh killed Mermaid," the big female rumbled. I noticed that she seemed to be making an effort to hold herself from swaying side to side.

Hobgoblins cared about the Mermaids? I thought. That was amazing. How had that come about?

"A Mermaid is killed," the leader said. "We hear about that, and about an Arukh who goes around talking about the killing. About how the killing was done."

He paused.

"Then we find one of our own."

He glanced left. I followed his eyes. Up about half way down the other side of the alley, two buildings came together imperfectly, leaving a small false corner. There was a shape covered by rags.

I understood suddenly why the Goblins had gone to such lengths to lure me to this alley. It had meant nothing to me. But if it had... if I'd been too familiar, too easy or too reluctant to come in here...

They'd been watching me from the start I realized. The Goblins hadn't led me to them. They'd followed. I tried to sort it out in my mind.

I stared at the shape.

It looked very fresh. Flies buzzed around it. The scent of blood hung heavy in the air.

Forgotten for a second, the other Goblin skittered away. I didn't need her anymore.

I almost started towards the body before catching myself.

"Arrah?" I grunted involuntarily, straightening up. I think that is what saved my life.

I heard a sharp intake of breath from the big female, but no one moved.

I understood now. Hobgoblins hadn't cared about the life of a Mermaid. I found the thought oddly disappointing. They were out only to avenge one of their own.

There was a body in the alley. There'd been a killing here. Suddenly, it all fit together. I was safe. All I had to do was convince them that their enemy was the one I hunted. I almost sighed with relief.

"I did not do that," I said.

"Arukh lie," the leader said genially, "it is in their nature, after all."

The words were a challenge, but the tone was an invitation to respond. I stared at him. He was walking a careful line. I would have to be careful as well.

"I did not do that. But I know who did. The same one who killed the Mermaid. The one I hunt."

"An Arukh."

Accusing me? Or the other?

"No," I said quickly, "not me. I hunt the killer."

The lead Hobgoblin seemed to look inward, as if picking the idea up with his hands and turning it over and over again to conceive the shape of it.

There were scattered mutterings around him. He whispered a few rasping sentences.

"We hear of you," he said finally. "Everywhere you go, you talk of killings. Of the same kinds of killings, of eyes and tongue, of many wounds, of the body cruelly torn. If it is not you, how do you know these things?"

"I follow the killer's trail, I see his work."

There was a scattering of almost Arukh-like grunts. A few of them shuffled back and forth, stretching and preparing for an attack.

I could see the circular way their minds were working. The Arukh knew

about the killings, therefore the Arukh must have done the killings. Despairing, I thought of the Dwarf who'd been killed on the street of joy.

Like him, I too would die and bear the blame, and the murderer would go right on killing.

Then a piece fell into place in my mind. An almost crystal calmness washed over me.

"The killer is a male," I told them.

I could feel their muscles tensing as they prepared to come at me. My statement was greeted with a shrug.

"So?"

"He rapes the bodies, not just with his knife."

The leader froze. I could see him thinking about it.

"Kakarupu," he said.

A youngish Hobgoblin grunted.

"Go and see," he ordered.

Kakarupu stood and turned to the body, and then turned away.

"I will not look," he said finally.

The leader took his eyes off me. That was a good sign. I looked around. "Ankintapta, Ruhsthatsi, go and look," he said, "and look carefully."

Two females stood and went to the corner, pulling away the coverings. There was a fresh whiff of blood in the air, thick and rich as they did so. This kill was very fresh, I thought.

"You will talk to us," the leader said to me.

"You are Khanstantin," I said suddenly. The name had popped into my head from the stories I heard. Leader of the Brave Tohkzahli.

He inclined his head.

"You have heard of us. Speak. Leave nothing out. We will know when you lie, and then we will kill you for it."

I told them about my examination of the Mermaid's body, in detail. I could see the two females at the body were paying attention. As I described how I explored the wounds' depth, I saw one conduct the same examination. The other staggered away and vomited.

I spoke of my retainer by the Selk, about the deposit with Iron Pants,

and about my investigations on the Street of Joy, and with the Kobolds.

"We know about that," Khanstantin said quickly. "We know of the killings among Kobolds."

I grunted. I gave them the rest, leaving out the attack of Hobgoblins and the conversations with the Mermaids.

The female examining the body called another Hobgoblin over. They seemed to examine the area around the body.

"Well?" Khanstantin asked.

"I..." the female began. She paused. "Come here and see."

Khanstantin got to his feet. With a motion, he waved for me to come with him.

We walked towards the body. I passed between two Hobgoblins, acutely conscious that now my back would be to them.

I halted, sucking in breath. This body was worse, much worse.

"Too much blood," the woman said, "it's hard to tell what was done."

The other bodies had been bled and moved. This one had bled right where it was left. Its blood had settled into the bed of straw and mud beneath it creating a stinking muck that blotted other scents out. Down in the ruined remains of its crotch, blood had pooled and congealed, mixing with ragged remains of innards leaving a thick, rancid soup in the hollowed bowel of her pelvis.

"The lower parts are torn right open, perhaps a male organ went in, perhaps not. I can't say from the way it looks. Can't smell sex either."

She waved at that part of the body, as if unwilling to touch it. This close, the odour of congealing blood was thick in our mouths, the air almost unbreathable.

Behind me, I could feel menace growing. The skin of my back writhed in anticipation of knives.

"But see here," she said quickly, indicating a spot below the hips, between the bodies splayed legs. Two small depressions, partly filled with a scum of seeped blood. "As if someone knelt or lay at..."

"And here." Indicating the ruined torso. "Blood is worked into the skin, not splashed, not drained. Blood shouldn't go this way, be here... Not

unless... he knelt... lay on... and pushed his body... the blood would go up, and between the bodies, it would..."

She stopped abruptly and took several steps away. She knelt, taking big gulps of air.

"You should not have had me do this," she said softly, her voice heavy with reproach.

"I am sorry," Khanstantin told her. "It was necessary."

He looked at me. A cold silence grew.

Another Hobgoblin, this one a mature male, the one who'd been called over spoke.

"The wounds are as the Arukh described. There's nothing here that needs iron, but it was a small knife, metal, two edges."

"Anything else?"

"Yes," the mature male said, "she was hit in the head, there is bleeding and a large dent. The bone in her head is broken. She was probably dying even as he took her. Probably she didn't even know what happened."

"A small mercy then," Khanstantin said. "Praise the Mothers, whose wisdom knows no bounds."

There was a murmur of amens.

He looked at me.

"Vhoroktik," he said, "search the Arukh for her knives."

Vhoroktik was the huge Hobgoblin female. I made myself relax as she stepped forward and put her hands on my body. Her eyes burned as if she wanted to tear me to pieces.

Roughly, she found my three knives and handed them to Khanstantin.

He glanced briefly and gave them to his companion, who examined each and shook his head.

"Show me her hands."

Vhoroktik grabbed each of my hands and shoved them in front of Khanstantin, turning them over one way and another. I didn't look at Khanstantin. I kept my eyes locked on Vhoroktik. She had strange eyes, with a flat nose and a heavy brow ridge. I could see where her skin had been blackened or burned to make it look more like a Hobgoblin face.

I felt a touch on my fingertips, as if Khanstantin was examining my nails.

"Show me her body."

Vhoroktik grinned and shoved me, turning my body towards Khanstantin. I could tell she was waiting for me to resist, waiting to let loose her hatred.

Her teeth were odd. Where I might have expected fighting fangs, some were missing. Other teeth were strangely shaped, as if filed down.

I felt her hands at my side. The sound of stitches tearing open rasped in the night air as she ripped the delicate Goblin handiwork that bound my tunic.

I grunted angrily but held her eyes.

I felt cold hands on my body, examining the skin of my stomach, going lower, tracing my hip. Finally it stopped.

"It's not her," Khanstantin said finally.

"She's Arukh," Vhoroktik rasped. "Let's kill her anyway."

There was something wrong with her. She was far too big to be Hobgoblin, far too massive and angry.

"What are you?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. She hit me, a clouting blow on the jaw that spun me half way around. I growled, recovering and coming back up in red haze, the motion tearing my tunic further.

"Enough!" snapped Khanstantin. "Enough!"

"How dare you!" Vhoroktik seethed, bubbling with black rage. It seemed to radiate from her, dispelling the vicious humour that she'd had when she searched me.

"I am Totzaklinh of the Brave Tohkzahli," the words seemed to hiss out of her, and she seemed to struggle again not to rock back and forth. Totzaklinh was how the Hobgoblins called themselves in the Mothers' speech.

"Enough!" Khanstantin roared. "Not here! Not now!"

Abruptly, Vhoroktik seemed to fold in on herself. She turned and took several stiff-legged steps away.

"Kill the Arukh!" she called back, her voice choking with emotion. "Kill them all!"

She started to sob loudly.

Khanstantin watched her sob. He looked back up at me.

"We should kill you now," he said conversationally. Which probably meant that he wasn't going to.

He gestured back at the body.

"What do you see when you look at that?" he asked.

The word meat leaped unbidden to my mind. I held my tongue.

"A dead Totzaklinh," I said carefully, using the proper word of Goblin speech, rather than the muddier syllables of trade language.

He shook his head.

"That's all you see? That was a person," he told me. "Her name was Vakhavlanka. I did not know her well, but I knew her. She was young, coming into that age when females of our folk begin to feel the wish to bear, and learn the sadness that comes with knowing they never will."

"She was missing a finger of her left hand, lost in some child game. She was not a fighter, only a house mender. She was good with her hands and very patient. She liked to carve things in wood, shapes and figures, as the Dwarves do. She was good among the children, known well for her patience with them.

"When I think of her, I remember her laughing. No one ever remembered anger of her. She did not deserve what was done to her. She did not earn this."

He stopped and regarded me.

Vhoroktik's sobbing made an anguished counterpoint to his words.

"I see a person," he said quietly, "lost now to all things and all times. Something is gone from the world and now it is a smaller place for the absence. All you see is a dead body, it is all you are capable of. This is the difference between us."

What could I say?

I'd never heard her laugh. Never watched her mind children or mend houses with thoughtful patience. I wasn't there when she lost a finger, or heard her weep for children she could never have. I could see the pictures

Khanstantin's words had made for me, but in the end, I could not bind them to the lump of cooling meat.

"She never spilled blood in her life," he said quietly. "Vhoroktik is right. We should kill every last one of you."

Vhoroktik's sobs were quieter. Sad, gulping sounds, as if weeping exhausted her.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said carefully. It was not the answer they wanted. I continued, "but I hunt him for the Mermaids, and I will find him. I will kill him."

He seemed to think about this.

"What if he kills you?"

That hadn't occurred to me. I thought about it for a second and shrugged. One way or the other, the problem would be solved.

Khanstantin stared at me.

"We have a grieving to do," he said finally. "This wasn't the first of our people to be taken."

I wanted to ask about that. How many? When taken? Where? I didn't dare. My fortunes were perilous enough as it was.

"This will be the last," he told me. "You understand?"

"I understand."

If there was another, they'd come for me for failing to find and stop him in time.

"When you find him," he said, "you tell us. That's all. We have our own claim. Now go away."

Khanstantin went to Vhoroktik, comforting her. The others stood around watching me.

"What about the Mermaid?" I asked. "Don't you care?"

He laughed.

"No more than you."

I pulled my torn clothes together and recovered my knives. Bowing submissively, I retreated, trying to get my back to the wall and sidle my way out.

As I did so, I stared around, trying to memorize the alley, trying to remember every detail. Earth road, thick blood smell, straw, bitter urine, excrement. Horses had been here, I realized, a lot of horses.

I retreated far down the street, until I found a section of wall that offered shadow. I pulled off my torn tunic, examining it. I'd had it since before I came to the city. The delicate goblin stitching was ruined. A black lump settled in my stomach as I fingered the torn seams. I remembered the Goblins who'd done it for me originally.

They were all dead now. I had killed them. I had torn my way into the nest, but I had been too late. They were all dead when I dug them out. Each of them, lost from all things, the world so much smaller and colder for each of them lost.

Tears fell from my eyes with the memory, as I set to work with needle and lacing sinew.

After I was sure the Hobgoblins had gone, I came back. There was little left in the alley to study. Any traces that might have been left had been obscured by the Hobgoblins.

I asked questions. The alley was used as a pen, usually for cattle, but for geese, sheep, any game that needed to be kept from wandering.

The Horsemen had used it last. Something to do with the great battle they'd fought.

And the Horsemen had their own Arukh.

Interesting.

After that, the trail cooled again. No one I spoke to had seen anything of particular interest to me.

I went to Goblin town. I avoided the Hobgoblins and traded with the Wild Girls. I got gossip and not much more. More bodies, times and places, little of use.

The story of my encounter was already filtering through Goblin town. They all knew that my life had been staked against the next killing.

I sighed.

I would have to report these things to the Elders.

Suddenly, I didn't want to be alone. I decided to go back to the Lodge and see if I could find the little Arukh. Mad she was, but Madness at my back was better than death at my throat.

Much later after I reported to the Elders, I made my weary way out to the Mermaid's dock. I sat and waited.

The Elders had received my report in silence. They'd nodded wisely as I told them of the cold red trail that lead from the Mermaid to other murders, but not to her killer. I had found nothing, and detailed for them all the places in which I'd found it.

They did not speak of my visits to the Mermaids, or of my confrontation with the Ublul. Did they know of it? I thought they did.

After my last visit to the Selk, I was certain that nothing happened here that was not watched and noted. Certainly no stranger could pass without being observed.

Which perhaps meant that the killer was a Selk? Which I hardly believed; he'd started too far afield. Or perhaps the killer had found a way to catch a Mermaid away from prying eyes? Perhaps the Mermaids could tell me how such a thing might be done?

So I had gone to the dock and now waited patiently, watching as the moon made its way into the night sky. There were shapes in the moon. I'd never really cared before. What were they? Signs? Reflections of the lands and waters below? I grunted. Little enough good it would do. The moon would not name my killer for me. I dropped my eyes to stare at its reflection in the water.

There was a sudden splash as a body rose out of the water. For a second a lithe male form hung in the air, surrounded by spray. My heart stopped. It crashed back in. My breath resumed.

I watched it turn in the water, making lazy splashes and waited for it to speak.

"You came back!" the Mermaid shouted.

Gari, I recalled, was the name Cara had used for him. He breached the water again, spinning back down with hands outstretched for a mighty splash.

Further out I could hear other splashes. Mermaids began to head in.

"Fierce woman!" they called, "Vampire!" "Blood drinker!" "Show us your breasts!"

Soon they were dancing in the water all around me.

"We brought this for you!" the one called Cara shouted as she swam right up and offered me a struggling fish.

I reached down to take it. I bit its head off and handed it back. It was kind of crunchy. I chewed slowly and showed them my teeth. They hooted with delight.

There were more calls for me to show them my breasts. I laughed at them, baring my teeth mirthlessly.

"We will sing for you," Cara announced.

"No songs," I said quickly.

"No songs?"

"No songs. I am here to talk about Mira," I told them.

They told me all about Mira's death rites. Not what I wanted, but they could not be hurried.

They told me of the massive woven bowery that had been made for her, and sent to float out to sea. The songs and chantings. The burning of grasses. It sounded quite elaborate.

Eventually, they persuaded me to listen to parts of the song they were making for Mira.

I sat nervously, listening to symphonies and harmonies, weaving and dancing in and out of each other.

It was noise. Complicated noise. Very complicated. Parts of it were almost... funny, joyful.

But it didn't affect me the way the Song of Ara had.

They would stop the song frequently, argued about this and that part of it, started over again, adding subtle flavours and notes.

I didn't understand any of it.

Sometimes, Cara would halt and try to explain things to me.

Little bits of music or explanation would come clear.

But mostly, I stared at her, uncomprehending.

"It's all right," she said finally, pulling herself up to my knee and then falling back into the water. It was as if she pitied me for not fully understanding Mira's song. More than that, it was as if they forgave me for not understanding it.

They'd said the song of Ara was simple. They'd made it so I could understand it.

Perhaps the song of Mira was just as powerful, but I didn't understand songs enough to feel it. Perhaps I could only feel the power of very simple songs.

What were these creatures?

"What do Arash do with their dead?" one called, quitting the song. I looked up startled.

"They rot." I shrugged.

"You don't do anything at all?"

Another rose out of the water. Incredulous.

I showed them my teeth.

"Sometimes...." I said, "we eat them."

A nervous giggle ran through them, and they swam closer, horrified, but eager to hear more. This strange news ended their play with the song.

They'd been playing, I realized.

Most races in the City did not like to be considered as food. Only the Giants were well known for eating people, though many stories were told about Trolls and Ogres in remote areas. Arukh ate each other, and given an opportunity, our enemies. In the City, it was frowned upon.

"Sometimes," I told them, "when an Arukh dies. If it is strong and brave, and if it is known and feared, then we will eat parts of it. To take its power away. To show that we are stronger."

Some of them spun in tight circles in the water to express the delicious horror.

"What happens if no one eats?"

"Worthless in life, worthless in death. No one cares. The body rots."

"Did you ever eat anyone?"

"When I was twelve. My master. I killed him."

He'd taken me, like he always did, and then the blood of the new moon came for the first time. I thought I was dying. Rage and fear gave me strength. As he'd slept, I crushed his head with a rock. I crushed it many times.

After a while, the bleeding stopped. I was alone for a time. The Goblins and the Troll had come much later.

They squealed in mock horror and hugged each other. They swam out and then in, jumped and splashed in their excitement.

"Will anyone eat you when you die?" one asked.

Others shouted with grotesque glee at the question.

I shrugged.

The first male I had met swam up to me. He put his hand on my boot and looked up with an expression of absolute sincerity.

"Promise us that when you die you will come to see us. We won't eat you but we'll care. We'll treat you like Mira."

I promised.

"That's better than being eaten?" Gari suggested.

I agreed that it was. He dipped below the water but suddenly rose up again to grab my boot. Startled, I jerked, but he held it fast. His eyes met mine.

"Just don't drink our blood. Okay?"

In answer I pulled at my ripped leather jacket, exposing one breast. In mock surprise he heaved backwards splashing with his hands.

Excited, several males arched onto their backs, displaying their prominent organs. A couple of females began to chase them back and forth as they hooted with joy.

"How would someone take Mira?" I asked finally.

"Ah," said Gari, thinking hard, "they must have pulled her from the water."

"Could this be done?"

I did not think it would be easy.

"No," said Cara. "We are safe in the water."

They told me the story of the Panther and the Beaver, and how the

Beaver, helpless on land, drowned the Panther when it came into its element.

Again, there was a strange cadence to it, as if it was being reproduced exactly as heard from another storyteller, just like the Goblin story.

A harpoon, I thought, or a big fishing spear. Even a Kra Lance to hold the body. But there'd been no sign of such a wound.

Perhaps a net? Something to pluck and haul the Mermaid out?

Would a net show signs on the body? Scratches perhaps? Abrasions? Bruises? I couldn't recall any.

"She must have come out of the water on her own," one of them said.

"Yes," I said. That seemed likely. "Would she come out for a stranger?"

They grinned, bobbing in the water, shaking their heads in the negative.

This was the middle of Selk territory.

"Did she have..." I couldn't remember the word, "friends... who came to visit her? Friends she might have trusted?"

"Oh yes," they said, "many Selk."

I had discounted Selk, I thought. Perhaps I shouldn't have. I shrugged. If need be, I could come back again for the name of every Selk that knew Mira's name.

"Anyone else?"

"Sometimes people come to the dock," Cara said. "If they seem interesting, we will talk to them."

"Ever see Mira talking to anyone dangerous?"

"Like you?"

I grinned at them showing fangs. They shivered deliciously in the water, grinning back.

"Never. There has never been anyone like you here."

"No Arukh?"

"None."

"Anyone odd in any way? Anyone who seemed strange? Or secretive? Anyone who was especially interested in Mira?"

They looked blank.

I was going about this the wrong way, I decided. Too many Selk were

watching who came and went from the Mermaids' dock. He would have to find a way to capture her somewhere else.

I grinned to myself. That's how I would do it.

"Perhaps..."

I began to tell them about my researches. About the other body I had found when they'd brought me out. About the Street of Joy, and the Kobolds. That captured their attention.

They found the encounter with the street shaman perfectly thrilling and romantic. I had gone further and inquired of Dwarf and Vampire and Half-races. I told them about bodies which had been found horribly mutilated, about others who had disappeared and never been found.

The killer had moved from one race to another. The victims always young, mostly female. There had been no particular selection of the victims. Some had powerful and vengeful families. Others had nothing. I suspected that they were taken by opportunity rather than design.

Which itself suggested a remarkable ability to travel freely in the city.

"Flavours," one of them called out, interrupting my thought. "He is trying different flavours of people."

I thought that was rather perceptive.

How many? They asked. I took a number and cut it in half, then I cut it in half again. A dozen.

They shivered in the water.

"Do you know who?" Venn asked.

I nodded. I paused for a second.

"An Arukh."

I waited for them to look at me and see a monster.

"It's funny he didn't eat Mira," Gari wondered.

I burst out laughing.

They put me in a little boat again, and pushed me up the river, not as far as before, to a series of little, secluded coves.

I stepped from the boat, examining the first of them.

The cove consisted of a small, shallow beach. The land rose steeply, thick

with densely packed trees and brush.

"Goblin woods," I grunted.

Cara smiled shyly.

"We like to come here," she told me. "We like to play and talk. Sometimes Goblins come. They are good at making love."

That was what Goblins were famous for. I grinned myself.

It hadn't happened here, I decided. No horse could come here.

The second cove was a little better, larger. There were traces of Goblin spoor, but nothing recent.

The third cove was where it happened. It was no larger than the first cove, but flatter. The slope was gentler, the sand beach giving way to a narrow meadow and the trees not quite so thick as the other coves. A shallow pool ate into the beach at one end.

There were drag marks in the sand. I followed them up onto the grassy strip, finding a spot indifferently covered with stained sand. There had been a lot of blood, it had sat on top of the soil in a puddle, too thick to seep away, too thick to dry properly. Even covered with sand, there was still the faint odour of rancid, rotting blood.

I stared. There was enough disturbance in the grass. He'd done it here, both the murder and the violation. A small trail of blood, smears and droplets... footsteps in the sand. He'd gone to the water, to cleanse the blood from his body.

"Have you found something?" Cara called.

I'd made them stay in the water. It was safer for them there.

"Nothing," I called back.

Sometime afterwards, the body had been pulled further along the meadow. It was no longer bleeding, but it had been laying in its blood, and there'd been smearing. It had been dragged, not lifted. Probably by the hair, I decided, as I examined crushed and bent vegetation.

She'd been dropped in a patch of wildflowers. I got down on my hands and knees, examining the patterns of crushed flowers. Their smell mixing with the smell of blood.

He had taken her again in this spot, I was sure of it by the marks he'd left. What he did, excited him beyond all measure.

I found the remains of a campfire, well hidden. Had he been waiting here in hiding for a Mermaid to come along? If so, there'd have been a danger that she might see the campfire and be warned away. Or perhaps the campfire was the signal, to lure her to the cove? Was this special to the killer? Or did Goblins light small fires to bring Mermaids? Or perhaps the fire came after the killing? I asked, but they didn't know. Sometimes they came for Goblin fires, sometimes they stayed away. If there'd been an assignation a fire could have been the signal.

I stirred the ashes with my hand, but they were only cold ashes, no way to tell anything more.

There was horse spoor. I looked at the cove. You could bring a horse down here with some difficulty. It wouldn't come on its own. I followed the trail, finding a small flat meadow further in, where it had been pastured. I did not doubt that the meadow lead to the horse trails I'd found earlier.

When I returned, I splashed out into the water and got back in the boat.

Goblins, I thought to myself, Goblins might have seen who waited in this place. I would have to speak to Goblins.

"This is it," Gari said softly. "This is where she was killed, wasn't it?"

I stared at him.

"Yes," I said finally.

One should not lie to the Mermaids.

None of this brought me any closer to the killer. They brought me back and I rejoined the little Arukh at the edges of Selk territory. She'd waited patiently for me there, polishing that great bronze Troll sword she'd obtained. It amused me that she clung to so impractical a weapon. It seemed consistent with her character.

By dawn, we were walking back to the lodge. I was tired and irritable. As I walked down the street I saw a face. The prostitute. She was sitting in front of a tenement. She looked up, catching my eye.

"Copper Thoughts sends his regard," she said.

"What?" I asked, glancing around nervously. There was a movement in

the street, like a knife slipping from its sheath. Some turned and moved towards me, no longer casual, as others fled the smell of danger.

"Death," she said without emotion. "Copper Thoughts sends you death."

Quite suddenly I was surrounded. I turned slowly. The little Arukh with me gave this strange squeal, a mixture of tension and fear. Her head darted around nervously.

I turned a slow circle, glancing about. The blonde prostitute stood to my left, holding a knife. There were a half dozen girls, a couple of boys, all still painted from the Street of Joy. I counted them for little, just show and nothing more.

There were also more I took to be warriors, or at least fighters. Some were just downriver trash, a few were dressed as the Horsemen. I tried a quick count. There were far too many. They all had the same look.

Copper Thoughts was obviously a powerful shaman to own so many souls.

The street emptied in all directions and everything seemed to go quiet. The warriors let people pass, staring at me. I growled.

Pulling my long killing knife I let my head hang and advanced on them, grunting. Show me weakness, I thought. Show me weakness and I'll cut past you and be gone.

I'll hole up in the Lodge and wait them out. They'd never dare come inside Iron Pants Lodge after me. And if they did, they'd never come out alive.

The sounds of my footsteps as I shuffled seemed unnaturally loud. Behind me, I could hear the little Arukh rocking nervously back and forth, her hand on the long hilt of the bronze sword on her back, ready to draw but fearing to. I could sense her ache to escape.

They bunched together against any direction I moved. I feinted, they moved easily to counter me. Behind them, onlookers began to gather, a crowd drawn by the scent of blood.

Like wolves, I thought suddenly, just like wolves they hunted me. I felt a sudden flush of fear.

"Abomination," a voice rang out.

Copper Thoughts stepped forward, walking casually until he stood in front of me. Pipe around his neck, he was resplendent in his copper beaded finery. He held two bronze knives.

I stepped back away from him, cowering even as I drew my knives.

He glanced at the little Arukh.

"Begone."

She scrambled away, slipping past warriors that paid her no attention, spared her not a glance.

"You touched the sacred Pipe," Copper Thoughts called to me, he seemed just on the edge of coherence. "For that you die."

This explained, at least, the Hobgoblins' attack earlier. Copper Thoughts had sent them.

"Coward," I snarled bitterly. "Will you watch as I cut down your dogs again? Or will you try me yourself?"

I growled at those closest to me.

The little Arukh had pulled herself from the crowd. She climbed up the side of a building, working her way onto a sun ledge. I glanced at her, she stared, eyes bright, panting hard. Safe now, she was no longer afraid, only curious. She wanted to see me die.

I'd given her no cause to love me. I snarled a little and forgot about her. There were other things to think of.

A fighter approached, catching my eye. He moved warily, his steps small and tentative. The decoy. I grinned mirthlessly at him, my heart pounding, crouching almost down to my haunches.

I heard footsteps rushing behind me. The muscles in my back writhed. The man in front charged.

I leaped to the side, spinning.

The fighter behind me was a big beefy man, deceptively fast. I spat at him. The decoy lunged at me. I turned back swinging wildly. He backed quickly, almost stumbling, but I didn't have time to press him.

The other lunged for me again. I caught his wrist with my left hand, pushed it out throwing off his counterstroke and moved in. I kicked him hard even as I drove my knife into his neck. He gripped my wrist and knife even as he fell.

I heard others moving in around and behind me. I pulled the dying man to me, turning his body outward, as I wheeled around. From the corner of my eye I saw the first fighting man closing in.

I drove the fingers of my right hand into his eyes. He screamed as I curled the fingers into his sockets, the jelly running down his cheeks. I jerked him forward. He fell holding his ruined face in front of me.

"Arrah!" I roared, crouching between two men, one dead, one ruined. My body rocked wildly from side to side as I swung my head. I slashed the air wildly with my knife, swinging it back and forth.

"Arrah, Arrah, Arrah!" I bellowed. "Send me your dogs. I will kill them all!"

I remembered the burned woman. My voice rose in pitch, "Killkillkill!"

I leaped back and forth around the fallen men, slashing wildly at the warriors, not close enough to touch, but close enough to make them flinch. The fighters retreated. I rushed them, roaring, trying to get past.

Metal clashed on metal as I cut and thrust, feinted and dodged and was driven back.

I stood next to the bodies, crouching, my weapons ready, panting and shaking. I tried to gather myself together.

Anyone who came at my back would have to cross the dead man. Not much of an obstacle, but it might throw off their stride or slow them down enough.

Copper Thoughts watched.

I spat and hissed at him.

"You die today," Copper Thoughts said, "by my hand."

I grunted.

Then a thought occurred to me.

"Will you try to kill me," I grunted, "the way you killed the Mermaid?"

For a second, he looked startled.

"I kill whoever I want," he said, "however I want."

"Try," I said, with the bravado I had left.

"I will cut out your glands," snarled Copper Thoughts, "I will take all

your power and make it powder for my pipe. I will suck on your spirit to make me strong."

He raised the pipe to his nostrils and depressed a stud. He grunted.

"Courage," he said.

I should charge him now, I thought, but my legs wouldn't move. I could only wait for him.

He depressed another stud. His snort was almost a cry of pain. Veins stood out in stark relief on his face and arms.

"Strength," he choked.

He depressed a third stud on the pipe. He shrieked and seemed to stagger unsteadily. His body swelled as he drew breath.

"Speed," he cried.

He stood there for a second, swaying and panting as the magic coursed through him. His eyes bulged, black fluid trickled from his nostrils. The pipe dropped from his hands to hang again around his neck, but he still gripped the knives.

"Arrah," I roared at him, gripping my knife tight.

He charged. He was on top of me before I knew it. His right knife came overhand at me. I barely blocked it with my wrist. I managed to catch his left in my elbow. His arms felt like iron. I was in too close for a counter move. He kneed me, lifting me off the ground. Pain cascaded through me. Three times our blades clashed. I backed away desperately parrying lightning strokes. He came in close, sweeping my knife away. His face grinned madly inches from mine, he wouldn't notice anything I could do to him. I was going to die. I dove in closer, my jaws closed on his throat, my head twisted.

Effortlessly he tossed me away. I rolled, struggling to my feet with blinding speed. He was already on top of me. Blood spurted in my face. I barely blocked his right thrust with both hands. I twisted to evade his left but he slashed through my leather armour, grazing the skin.

I staggered back. He was looking at me strangely. Looking at the blood that had spurted into my face. He looked down. His throat was torn out, his windpipe hung down his shirt and the artery spurted like a red fountain.

"Huh Huh," he sounded, and toppled.

Copper Thoughts was dead.

A whisper went through the crowd.

I panted for breath, staring, feeling a rush of strange elation.

Copper Thoughts was dead and I was alive.

"Ah... Arh," I breathed.

"Arrah," I bellowed, roaring to the sky. I caught the empty eyes of the soul slaves.

"Mighty shaman," I laughed. "Mighty shaman, where is your power now?"

I stepped forward and kicked the body, listening to the sound of bones breaking. It flopped over limply, even as my heart leaped at the movement. It fell limp. Still dead.

I laughed again, and stepped up, stomping down hard and feeling his ribs collapse.

Yowling something incoherent, I reached down shoving my hand into the hole I'd made in his throat. I picked him up like that, waving his body like a flopping doll.

I charged a fighter; he scrambled away. I rushed several others. They fell over each other backing away from me.

I felt powerful. Dragging the body, I stepped back and swept the pipe into my hand. I let the body fall and waved the pipe in the air.

"This is his power," I yelled. I swung it against the ground, shattering it. With my hands, I tore it to pieces, flinging its little mechanisms in their faces. They flinched. Some fled.

I was breathing hard.

Mostly though, slaves' blank faces looked at me, and then at the dead shaman. There were enough of them to kill me. One by one they turned and shambled away. Their will lay at my feet with its throat torn out.

"Go away," I told them. "He's dead and its over."

I was tired suddenly, the exhilaration of survival draining out of me. I squatted beside the body.

There was a knife in front of me. Not mine. One of Copper Thoughts

knives, an ostentatiously engraved, oversized bronze. I picked it up. It was heavy, the blade too thick, almost an axe.

It was a country tool, I thought, blunt and effective, made up to be gaudy and extravagant. Like Copper Thoughts himself. I glanced up. They weren't approaching. Some had left. Others just stood there, as if they were waiting for a sign.

"Go away," I told them.

Not the right kind of knife. I stuck it in the body. No more blood came out the wound.

They began to drift away

Soon only the blinded man and the blond prostitute were left. I sat on the dead shaman, watching them. A pool of blood seeped slowly from his body.

The blond girl stepped forward, wary but resolved. She carried a knife, I counted it for nothing. She was less than a ghost.

"Give it to me," she said.

I stared up at her. She swayed, not the purposeful Arukh way, but like grass in the wind.

From the corner of my eye I watched the blinded man crawl to the side of a building, and then using it as a guide, slowly find his way around the corner.

"What?" I asked her.

I wondered what would happen to him. There is little need for sightless warriors. As good as dead, I thought. There is no pity in the world. Perhaps the Kobolds might find a place for him.

"The armlet you wear. It is Lerel's. Give it to me for her."

The knife slipped from her fingers as she reached into her pouch. She held out a couple of small pieces of bronze and a few coppers.

"This is all I earned today. Give it to me. Please."

Wordlessly I handed her the armlet. She gazed at it with dull eyes. Then she looked up at me.

"She is dead?" she asked.

I nodded.

"She was my friend. We grew up together. When I began to taste of dreams I shared them with her. She was always braver and stronger than I was. He took both our souls."

"What happened to her?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"You know it better than I do," she answered slowly.

Yes, I thought, I did. Lerel died. Mira died. The trail had lead back to Copper Thoughts. It was finished, and the Selk would be pleased. Except...

"Tell me about the iron knife," I ordered her.

"What knife?"

"Copper Thoughts had an iron knife," I said, I moved my hands miming it. "This long, two edges. Where is it?"

"He had no iron knife," she said. "Those are his knives." She pointed at the one I held, and another a few feet from us.

I glanced at them. Not the right knife, I thought, neither one. Not the right knife for the killings.

Copper Thoughts had admitted it to me.

Or had he? Was it just arrogant bluster? Thinking back, I couldn't be sure if he'd even known what I asked.

If it wasn't him, who was it? How did it connect to Copper Thoughts? I couldn't imagine an Arukh, no matter how clever, bending a shaman to his will.

Had he bent an Arukh instead? And favoured this Arukh with an iron knife while he made do with bronze? That made no sense.

"Why did Copper Thoughts come after me?" I asked.

"You touched the pipe. We all saw you."

Fool, I thought irritably.

"Not enough," I told her. "Why else?"

I wanted to hear her say that Copper Thoughts had done it. If not that, I wanted her to tell me who stood behind Copper Thoughts.

She shrugged, turning the armlet over and over in her hand.

"You had Lerel's armlet. You talked about killing. Maybe he thought

you'd killed Lerel."

Fool, I thought again. There was nothing inside her. Just an empty half-life, half lived. I turned and examined the shaman's body.

His head lolled, dangling with only the bone and cords of flesh holding it. I picked up one of his knives and sawed it loose. Freed, the head lolled on its side, a foot from the body, expression vacant. His knives had been better than mine. I decided to keep them.

His body was drenched with blood, soaking the fine leather and cloth workings that covered him. Little pouches, bags, dangled from fringe and tassels all over him. Magic. I noticed that in my elation, I'd already torn several open. I shivered. I tried not to disturb the rest. He had gold on him.

I thought about that. Flashy, ostentatious, gold was a sign of his power. He'd like having gold. He'd probably spend it freely.

Where would it come from? His slaves would pay in copper and bronze.

Iron knife?

"Do you know who spent on him?" I asked the girl.

She didn't seem to hear me.

"Lerel tried to get away. She wanted her soul back. But no shaman would help her against another shaman. She tried anyway. She was stronger than me. I didn't fight," she mumbled.

So Copper Thoughts had killed her, I thought, and fed her to his magic, the way he'd killed the Mermaid. The way he killed the others. Was it for magic, or just madness? How had he managed to hide it so long, and from so many?

Where was the knife? It always came back to the knife.

"Did you do anyone with gold before you came here?" I asked doggedly. "Did anyone give gold to your master?"

"An Arukh."

My ears perked up.

"But he didn't give me anything. He gave gold to Copper Thoughts. Copper Thoughts lets him have me." She sniffled, "I don't mind. He doesn't hurt me."

"Did he have an iron knife?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"He is nice. He doesn't hurt us. He used to do Lerel too."

My heart leaped at that. This Arukh was linked with Lerel. It was the best connection I'd heard.

"You should get to know him better," I told her wryly, "What does he look like?"

"Lerel was my friend. I liked to pretend that she had escaped."

I looked at her. Whatever she felt for her friend, it was a distant and empty thing. More a memory than a real feeling. She was empty inside, like an Arukh, but without even hate and rage.

This is what we are, I thought, without the madness that drives us on, we are empty things.

She toyed with the band in her hands.

"What does he look like?"

For an instant, I thought she hadn't heard me.

"Like an Arukh, of course."

She understood the question. Good.

"Older. Short. Long skinny arms and legs. He has a southern accent, not like the City Arukh. He has a dent on his head where the hair doesn't grow. He runs with Humans."

"I want to find him."

"He's right there." She pointed.

I looked up. Caught a glimpse of scarred face at the corner the blind man had found his way past, and then it was gone.

I did not follow. I was too close to trembling from the Shaman. Whatever strength I had was fled, but I'd have it back.

"I know you," I whispered, "Arukh that rides with men. I know you now, and I will have you."

He'd learned, I realized, from the Humans. He'd taken their butchery, their savagery, and brought Arukh lusts to it. He was the one, I knew with a sudden merciless certainty, that killed the Mermaid, that killed the others.

"I will have you," I promised the empty air.

I heard a sound behind me, a furtive scratching.

I turned. The young female crouched on the other side of the street. She'd climbed down and sidled close. Her eyes still shone.

"You again," I said. "Come here."

Had she lead them to me? No, that didn't work. She'd been with me.

She didn't move, just stared all wide-eyed and longing. I stood there, covered in Shaman's blood. His life pooled at my feet. I grabbed his head by the hair, wrapping it around my fingers and dangled it out before her.

"Is this what you came to see?"

"You have killed a Shaman," she said. "You have killed a mighty Shaman."

"Is that what you sought to know from me?" I asked. "Killing?"

She didn't reply.

I bent down and ran my hand through the pool of Shaman's blood.

Standing, I held out my hand.

"Come here."

She whined.

"Come," I commanded harshly.

I stared, holding my arm out stiff, blood dripping from my fingertips.

Crouching, she came forward a few steps. She stopped and whimpered, hypnotized by the blood on my fingers.

I held still.

Whimpering, she backed away a step, then ducked her head submissively and crouched forward, bending lower and lower.

Half crawling, half cringing, she advanced, whining closer and closer.

Now she was only a head's distance from my outstretched hand. She ducked her head until it was below my hand.

Mouth opened wide, cowering submissively, she began to lick the blood from my fingers. Cold shivers ran down my spine.

"You want to know about killing?" I whispered, "I will give you the secret knowledge of killing."

She stared at me, eyes wide, making little mewing sounds in her throat, licking at my palm. I felt a wetness in my loins and hated it.

"We kill," I told her fiercely. Her tongue swept and flickered along my dripping fingertips. "This is what we are. There is no life in us, only death."

I felt a pang, like a sharp knife sliding between my ribs. This was what we were, rotting meat making more rotting meat? Why bother?

"All things die. Him, you, me, everything. Remember it well. This is death."

"Remember," I hissed, knowing that whether I wanted it or not, I owned her now.

I closed my eyes, thinking of blood and Mermaids.

"This is the head of Copper Thoughts," I announced to the Elders, waving it aloft triumphantly.

"For his magic was the Mermaid killed," I told them proudly. "By his magic did his Arukh kill. I bring you justice."

After, I planned to bring it to show the Mermaids.

"Mighty was Copper Thoughts," I crowed. "But mightier still was I."

Several of the Elders looked away; some turned their backs to me. Only the speaker faced me directly, looking into my eyes; carefully avoiding looking at Copper Thoughts

Confused, I held the head before him, so that his eyes were on a level with Copper Thoughts. I shook it a little bit, so he would look at it. His eyes never left mine.

"Is that all?" he said softly.

I cocked my head and lowered Copper Thoughts until he dangled from my fingers.

"Finding death and ruin, we can only make more? Is this the best in you? To parade with the head of your victim?"

"He's dead," I said, my pride deflating. "I killed him."

"For what purpose do you take the head?"

"I killed him," I said plaintively.

"Yes."

I felt relief then.

"Mira is revenged," I whispered.

"Yes."

Something more. I thought for a moment.

"No more killing," I said. "No one will ever die like Mira again, not for him, not this way."

He nodded.

"Good."

I smiled.

"Tell it to be gone," one of the other Elders said suddenly, "it disgusts us."

I disgusted them.

My mouth went sour.

I disgusted them?

A slow burning started in my guts.

They'd called me. They'd brought me to do that which they could not do themselves. And now they wanted me gone. Now I disgusted them.

I growled low in my throat, my body imperceptibly swaying from side to side.

I heard shuffling behind me. The guards.

Another growl rippled out of me.

The speaker stepped forward, offering his bare hand.

"Touch me," he said.

Startled from my anger, I took his arm in my hand.

"What do you touch?" he asked.

"Flesh," I replied.

"We are all flesh," he told me.

I cocked my head, staring at him.

"You, me, the Mermaids, Copper Thoughts, we are all flesh."

Behind us, I heard the Ublul close in. I tensed.

"You could tear my flesh," he said. "You could hurt me, you could kill me, before Slal could stop you. You could hurt others, kill them."

"Yes."

I was confused. Did he want me to? Was he asking?

"But after, Slal would hurt you. He might kill you."

A challenge? I stared at him, trying to read his expression.

"Yes?" I said cautiously.

"Do you fear death?" he asked.

Threat? No, just a question.

I shrugged.

"We do not fear death," he told me. "Death is merely a necessity. We do not celebrate death. We do not care about dead flesh. We celebrate life."

I dropped my eyes from his, to stare at the severed head I held by its hair. Without quite understanding why, I felt shame. I had felt strong and mighty, but now, it was as if all that I had done meant nothing. Less than nothing. I felt suddenly that the killing of Copper Thoughts was like a shadow against substance.

"Arrah," I said softly

"We did not summon you to make death," he said. "We called you to preserve life."

"I don't understand," I replied.

He smiled gently. There was no malice in it. He touched my face, his fingertips soft and gentle against my cheek.

"It's all right," he said. "It isn't expected of you. You may go now."

He stepped away from me.

The rest of the Elders had departed while he'd spoken to me. Only he, the guards and myself were left.

"You may go," he repeated, backing away.

It was over?

Uncertainly, I backed up a step, the head of Copper Thoughts swinging from my fist with new weight.

I turned and began to walk away, the Ublul surrounding me.

Slal walked beside me.

"You did doubly well to kill Copper Thoughts," he told me. "A powerful Shaman that, difficult to kill, and a terrible one, needing to be killed."

I felt lighter with these words, as if he'd given me something I'd craved

but not gotten from the Elders.

Approval? Respect?

I decided suddenly that I liked him. Suddenly, he was more than just another guard, more than some stolid, featureless, mass to kill or be killed, to fight or flee. I glanced at him.

"Do not show this to the Mermaids," Slal advised.

I cocked my head. How had he known my plans? And why should he challenge them? I felt my sudden affection betrayed. He was just as empty of feeling as the Elders.

"You can't stop me," I snapped at him.

"I would that they did not see this truth in you. I would not have them hold this knowledge. If you do, they will know you for what you are."

What I was?

A mighty warrior, destroyer of their enemies, avenger of their wrongs?

No, they were not made that way, I realized. They would not see this.

They'd see a grinning monster parading about with grisly relics. An abomination. A killer.

A killer.

Abruptly, I turned away from Slal and started walking, my heart pounding, my feet kicking fiercely at the ground.

"I would that they did not see this truth in you," rang in my ears.

My throat tightened. How dare he? Abruptly, I wanted to turn back to Slal. To tear his throat out as I'd torn Copper Thoughts. To make him bleed, to suffer, to feel pain.

"The truth..."

I didn't look back. My eyes stung as if I'd stared at the sun. I blinked again and again to clear water from them. I gasped over and over, trying to catch my breath, feeling my heart pounding in my chest.

The truth...

The truth sat heavy on my tongue like a mouthful of cold ashes. I was Arukh. I was despised. I was unwanted. I was abomination.

The truth...

Vhoroktik's words rang in my ears.

Kill them all…

"No," I said out loud, startling passersby with my vehemence. "I don't care. Let them see the truth in me. Let them see what I am. It doesn't matter."

But I didn't turn back towards the Mermaids.

"I'm not finished," I told myself. "I'll go to the Mermaids when I'm finished. When I've done what I promised. Then I'll go."

Kill the Arukh, I thought.

And deep down, some part of me wondered that the best I could come up with for the Mermaids was to kill for them again.

The truth…

If truth had a neck, I thought bitterly, I'd wring it.

When I was well away from the Selk Domain, I flung the head of Copper Thoughts as hard as I could and watched it vanish over the rooftops.

"Arrah," I bellowed at the world.

"Ayah ayah," the bearded Dwarf said and cast his throw.

We watched the crude dice bounce in the bowl.

"Nine," said the Dwarf holding the bowl. "I win."

There was a grumbling around the circle. The bowl was overturned as several Dwarves began to refill their pipes, tamping bitter weeds down and painstaking lighting the base.

Instead of taking smoke from small clay braziers, or common fires, Dwarves made pipes. I had tried them, once in a while, myself. It was a strangely barren and solitary experience, devoid of the sudden flush of heat, the stinging of the eyes, the tickle of smoke in your nose, as you bent your face to the fire, the closeness of companions bending with you. Instead, there was merely a little bowl held away from the face, and smoke sucked as if through a straw.

Rather than take smoke from a pipe, I stood with the Humans in the circle to go and refill our mugs with beer. We waited patiently, handing over pieces of copper as the one armed bartender dealt with each of us in turn.

"Somebody's got to come up with a better way to make a pipe," a Dwarf complained behind me.

"Nothing's wrong with the pipe, we need a better way to light it."

"Oh," asked another, "what way is that?"

"I'm thinking, perhaps a copper tool, heat it in fire till it's red hot, and then touch it to the weed."

"Burn your hand."

"Keep it wrapped in something."

"No," someone said, "here's a better way."

As I sat down again, someone was making an impassioned defence of the old method of lighting pipes.

I sat down again, my back to the door. This place was at the edge of the Dwarf Kingdom. Horsemen came here frequently, passing in and out as they did their business with the Snow Leopard Totem.

I'd been here for three days, listening to Dwarves argue about everything under the sun and the moon. That was what Dwarves did, they talked and talked and argued.

I'd changed my clothes, abandoning my torn jacket and tunic for leggings and windshirts in the style of the Horsemen. Their style of clothing was becoming popular among the toughs. I wore a version of the Horsemen's wide brimmed hat down low, shading my face.

Horsemen had been in here twice, since I had come. They hadn't looked at me, and I hadn't wanted them. A few Arukh frequented the tavern, as did Hobgoblins and Kobolds. There were enough of them so that I didn't stand out.

"Where do the Horsemen come from?" I asked.

No danger there. The conversation always came down to the Horsemen.

"I've heard," a Dwarf said, "they came down by the west."

A Human scoffed.

"That's the Ytha people who came from the west. They aren't riders, they go by canoe."

"I just heard that, that's all. I didn't say they were from there."

"Eastern plains."

"That's Vampire territory."

"Vampires drove them out."

"They came from the scrublands."

"Poor lands for a horse folk."

"I hear they've been riding the southern edges of the Eastern plains, the Vampires weren't letting them get too far."

"No," a human said, "they're from Zihgoshk."

"Zihgoshk is a Vampire city."

"It was, but the Vampires were driven out."

"So why aren't they there now?"

I'd heard it all before. The Fanir, as the Horsemen called themselves, seemed to have been drifting a long time. According to gossip, they'd taken a city or two, but hadn't been able to hold them. They'd been pushed out of good lands, forced from one marginal land to another by stronger peoples. Finally, they'd wound up here. Finally, they'd somehow become strong.

It was a puzzle, I'd concluded. The stories suggested weakness, a scavenger people, hunting their sustenance around the edges of other peoples, driven this way and that. The reality, however, was all ferocity and danger.

They were ruthless. That much was clear. If the Horsemen had suffered, the lesson they'd taken from that was no quarter and no mercy.

A group of Horsemen came in. The muscles of my back twitched, but I gave no sign and simply made my cast. Behind me, they took the bar table and began to talk and laugh.

After a few moments passed, I casually turned, and while drinking, glanced at them.

My blood froze.

He was there. I turned back, without letting my eyes linger.

A skinny Arukh with a dent in his head wasn't hard to trace. Once I knew him, and knew that he ran with the Horsemen, all I had to do was find a place where he showed up from time to time.

"Bastards," the man next to me slurred. He was middle aged, with the

heavy build that spoke occasional warrior and regular farmer, he had the stubborn look in his eye that I've seen in Humans of those trades.

"Bastards," he said quietly again, pronouncing more carefully. A couple of the Dwarves looked nervous.

"They wiped out the Ghota," he said, "killed every man from elder to child, left but a handful of women and not many of those. Old Terek, the Human King, he welcomed them in, they set his head on a pike."

"That was some time ago," said a Dwarf. "Best not to speak of it now."

The Horsemen hadn't been gentle. When they'd come, many Humans had fled to the Downriver. I hadn't realized at the time that it had been because of the Horsemen. I'd just noticed that there were more Humans around. Most of them had drifted away, back to the Human Kingdom.

"The way of war," another Dwarf said, trying to sound philosophical. "Lives are lost."

"No war," snapped the Human, his voice rising. "Treachery. They offered the hand of friendship, concealing their knives. They bought some and murdered others, and when they had all the tribes under them..."

"Shhh," one of the other Humans whispered.

The Farmer went on, completing his sentence, lowering his voice to a falsetto whisper.

"...then Copper Thoughts called a feast. A hundred feasted that night, and in the morning a hundred throats were slit..."

"I see you've got a game," a voice said. We looked back. It was one of the Horsemen, a big grinning man. "It looks interesting."

He pushed in among us. Squatting opposite the farmer.

"Now what were we talking about?" he asked.

The farmer went pale. Fear and defiance mixed on his features. He opened his mouth.

"Aru-" a Dwarf said quickly, then he glanced from me to the Arukh with the Horsemen. "-Vampires. You can't trust blood drinkers."

The Horseman looked at the Dwarf. He had blue eyes. They glinted under his shaggy brow. He looked back at the farmer.

"Now is that true?" he asked.

The farmer glanced right and left, looking for support. No one met his eyes. His lip trembled. The courage of drunkenness had fled.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Ah," said the Horsemen, "it's those Vampires is it? Well let me tell you, friends; before we're done, there won't be a live Vampire left in this city. Nor any who stand with them. That's the way of the Fanir: We know how to tell our enemies from our friends, and how to treat them both."

He left that hanging there as silence grew uncomfortable.

"What's this game? How's it played?" he asked suddenly, his voice genial.

One of the Dwarves explained the rules.

"Sounds like good sport," he said. "Set me in."

"Fine," said one of the Dwarves, his voice shaky. "It's the Hagrik and Hitokut, then..."

"No," said the Horseman, smiling. "I think I'm next."

"You and the Hagrik."

"No." The Horseman pointed at the farmer. "Me and him."

"I'm sorry," the farmer said suddenly. "I was drunk, I talk..."

"No shame to curse the Vampires," the Horseman said.

Next to the Horseman, I saw a couple of Dwarves glance up.

Someone behind us. I could feel my back twitching, the hairs standing up.

The Horseman rolled. Two and one, low scores.

"Go," he said, no longer friendly.

With shaking hands the farmer took the dice and rolled. They clattered in the bowel like dried bones in an empty pot, coming up three and five.

"Uh," the farmer began.

"I win," the Horseman announced. He started to reach for the dice.

"What?" the farmer said, confused suddenly. There could be no question as to who had diced higher.

"You cheat me," the Horseman bellowed.

We all jumped.

"Ackh-h," the farmer grunted, bending forward convulsively. Six inches

of spear point protruded down through his chest. He tried to rise, eyes wild, blood on his lips, or perhaps it was just the spear lifting him. He lurched forward onto his stomach. Arms and legs kicking, as we scrambled away.

His hand gripped my boot momentarily. I shook it off. Behind and above him, another Horseman, this one young and clean-shaven, grinning madly and holding the spear, forced him down with his foot.

The Farmer made incoherent noises, struggling to plead, to beg, sobbing for his life. The bearded Horseman, smiling, put his boot on the Farmer's head. The other Horseman, with the spear, pulled it back a little, a foot of blood soaked shaft now showing above the body and began to swing it back and forth like a churn. Under the wet noises of the spear in his chest, I could hear little tik sounds as the point skated up and down the inside of his ribs.

Frightened, I craved a weapon desperately, but all I had was a small slitting knife concealed upon me. The Bartender had made a point of taking away obvious weapons. He hadn't extended that rule to the Horsemen.

One of the Dwarves, a younger one, with something like presence of mind, kicked wildly at the body.

Spasming finally, the farmer went still, a river of blood gushing from his mouth.

"A cheat," the bearded Horseman said easily, "and no friend of ours. Tishaha folk. That tribe can be a bit... unreliable."

"Cheater," the young Dwarf grunted. "Yes, we all saw him cheat. He--"

His words left him. He'd run out of things to say.

The Horsemen grinned at him.

"There," the clean shaven one said to us, his eyes sparkled, "now that's how a friend acts."

I could feel my, everyone's, heart seem to race suddenly, at the realization that we should have been kicking the body, that we should have leaped upon the farmer, and in not leaping, we might somehow be considered enemy.

An older Dwarf, his face frightened, spat on the body. He had more

moisture than I; my mouth was dry as a bone.

For another instant, we all stood there, waiting to see what the Horsemen would do next. I was acutely conscious that the table of the Horsemen had gone silent. That my back was to them.

I didn't dare turn. There was an Arukh there who might know my face as well as I knew his.

We waited.

An immense pool of blood spread under the Farmer.

"Well," the Bearded Horseman said, easy and genial again. "I'm weary of gambling for now. I'm going to go have a drink with my friends. Someone clean off my winnings and bring it to me."

There was a murmur of assent. Two humans grabbed the legs of the Farmer and began to haul him away. Someone else dropped to their knees and began to paw with shaking hands through the pool of blood for coins.

My knees were trembling.

The bearded Horseman's blue eyes rested on me for a second. I bowed my head in submissive fear, crouching at the knees. Then he turned. They returned to their table.

One of the Dwarves began to head for the door.

"Hey," one of the Horsemen from the table called.

The Dwarf froze, quivering like a deer.

"Where you going? We might want to do some more gambling later. It's always good to gamble with friends."

They laughed.

One of the Bartender's sons came to cast earth and ashes onto the pool of blood. We moved down a little, to be away from it. Squatting in a circle.

With shaking hands, one of the Dwarves cast bloody dice into the bowl. As it rattled, it left little red stains on the inside.

"Who…who is next?" he asked.

"I don't… don't know," another said.

I took the dice, rubbing the blood in my palms. No one had bothered to even look at the numbers.

I swallowed beer.

"Pipes," I said, trying to calm myself, speaking to no one in particular. "You were speaking of a better way to make pipes?"

"Yes," a Dwarf said quickly. "Pipes. I've always said that ivory made the best Pipes."

This was met by a deepening silence. Vampires controlled the ivory trade.

"Soapstone, you mean," another Dwarf said suddenly. "It's soapstone you were speaking of...better than ivory."

"Yes," the first one said, almost sighing with relief. "That's what I meant."

The talk went on, careful and circumspect, with no resemblance to the things in our minds, but it went on. With each roll of the dice, we calmed ourselves. Still, nervous eyes shifted back and forth, and Dwarves pointedly took drinks from empty beer mugs, afraid to go and have them filled.

I could no longer stand it. By tiny increments, I shifted until I could see the Horsemen from the corner of my eye. None of them, especially the Arukh paid me particular attention. His name, I'd learned earlier, was Tashifar. One of those very rare Arukh that bear a name. Sometimes one or another Horseman would look towards us and say something, the rest would laugh. The skin of my back slowly stopped twitching.

The rest of the tavern was subdued. Almost everyone else trying to pretend everything was normal, hoping that the Horsemen did not visit upon them.

From the corner of my eye, I watched my Arukh, watched him drink and joke with the Humans. He did not even seem to register my presence.

The Horsemen, I had discovered, had arrived eight months ago with Tashifar among them. The killings had begun, as far back as I could trace them, seven months ago.

One of the Dwarves, with more desperation than courage, went out back to water the wall. He came back. Others of the Horsemen, or the other Tavern dwellers went out. They came back. One man sickened, the Bartender's sons dragged him out to the back, tossing him through a door

and quickly returning. The man returned, walking unsteadily a few minutes later.

Tashifar the Arukh stood. He began walking towards the back with an easy rolling gait, as the others joked behind him.

Without trying to watch him go, I emptied a bowl of pipe weed into the last of my beer.

When I was certain he was gone, I raised the mug and drained it. Bitter taste filled my mouth and I retched, bending forward.

"Oh no," a Dwarf said, pulling it away quickly, "not the bowl."

I widened my jaws and spewed a thin stream of beer vomit in front of them. Gasping loudly, I swallowed, working my throat, trying to keep it down a little longer.

"Another one," a voice said, one of the Bartenders sons. I felt hands on my arms, grasping me, pulling me away.

"This one's big, I need some help here," his voice was tinged with desperation, as if afraid the Horsemen might choose to get involved.

I retched again, vomit spilling down my front.

Another pair of hands on me, I was pulled to my feet and half walked, half carried to the back. A man returning, got out of our way, as I trailed vomit. The bearded Horseman glanced at me, his eyes burning and attentive. Then someone said something to him and his eyes looked away.

There was a walled courtyard in the back. I could see a small mound with a door, the cold room. The sons flung me out on my knees, only the Arukh, Tashifar, was there standing against the wall. I retched one more time as he glanced at me. He turned back to the wall, dismissing me. The sound and smell of urine was strong from him. I would have preferred him squatting.

Time to kill.

I stood quietly and took four silent strides towards him, drawing my slitting knife as I did so.

"For the Mermaid," I hissed, reaching around to cut his throat from ear to ear.

Arukh speed blocked me, his hand closing around the blade, I smashed

his head against the wall. Blood seeped from his hand but he did not let go the knife as he twisted in my grip. Frightened eyes met mine. My forehead slammed into his nose as he struggled.

He reached for his knife, my hand followed the thrust of his arm, struggled with him for the feel of the hilt. Our bodies swayed together, straining with intimacy. I pulled his knife. A corner of my mind was disappointed to find a normal bronze, too large by a measure. He had another somewhere.

He grunted, twisting against my strength. We stumbled two steps. His foot slipped in excrement, sliding into a knee-deep squatting pit. I followed him down as he used the movement to free himself from my grip. I slashed with his knife as he leaped and rolled, then leaped after him, dropping the slitting knife in the pit.

He landed on his feet, wary and ready. I rushed him, slashing for his face; he blocked it with a forearm guard, metal scraping metal, swinging around to face me. Not good. I could tell by his stance that he was a trained fighter. I wasn't trained. I advanced grinning fiercely, waving the knife. He backed up, raising his forearm guards.

"Remember the Mermaid?" I asked as the knife glinted. Twice more I rushed, striking at him. Twice more he blocked with the guards. On the second, I grabbed the guard with my free hand. He launched a blow at my face. I ignored it and with main strength, swung him off his feet.

He rolled, but I was almost on top of him. He barely evaded my thrust as I drew a line of blood at the edge of his guard. He backed away panting.

Suddenly people began spilling out of the doorway from the tavern. Horsemen. They ranged against me automatically. The phrase "like wolves" shivered through my mind.

I shifted and slid, so as not to be between them and Tashifar. He climbed to his feet, shaking his head, Horsemen at his back.

"Ho Taz," the Bearded Horseman called advancing on my side, "you have a new wench. Shame on you for not sharing."

"Careful," the Arukh called. "She's strong."

He began shifting to my other side as I backed a step. He came close; I

slashed and snarled. He grabbed for the knife. Too late, I thought, I'd have to run. Wildly I looked from one to the other, trying to judge the weakest.

"It's all right Taz. We are used to Orc strength," one of them said.

"You don't understand--" he cried.

I leaped away from Tashifar, ducking under the swing of the bearded Horseman's club. I held him close, hugging the breath out of him, swinging his body around, his feet in the air.

I lifted him up and threw him at his companions. They got out of the way, even as he rolled and found his feet. I feinted, rushing the smallest, they converging at him. Then I saw the knife.

For a second, that was all I saw. Black with grease, an iron knife smaller than usual with two edges, the second one notched. It filled my mind.

Without being aware of moving, I was in front of the knife wielder. It was the clean-shaven Horseman who'd speared the farmer. My hand caught his wrist, freezing the knife in place. I looked in his glittering blue eyes.

For a second, they all froze, seeming to glance towards him.

"It was you. You killed the Mermaid," I whispered.

Something dark and ugly passed over his face.

"So?" he replied.

I raised my arm and thrust with the knife, as the clean-shaven Horseman flailed in my grip. But something was wrong, the knife didn't move.

Tashifar.

Tashifar had my arm locked in his. I flung the Human away for a second to hit him. His grip loosened as blood flew from his nose and mouth but he didn't let go. Yowling with rage I hit him again. He released his hold, staggering backwards.

I turned looking for my Horseman. Others stepped in front of him.

"Careful, my Prince," one of them shouted, even as they moved to protect him.

They advanced, trying to surround me. None of them coming too close. Arukh, especially female Arukh were much stronger than Humans. But

Humans lasted longer. They aimed to use up my strength and then take me.

Not behind a stinking tavern, I thought.

I rushed them, and as they crouched for my attack, I went low, folding in and by force pushing between them. They turned even as I leaped past, blades whistling behind my back.

In front of me, the Tavern door. Crude wooden boards flew apart before me. One of the Bartender's sons appeared, a bucket in his hand. Then, just as suddenly, he was gone, the bucket floating in the air before me, I batted it away, ploughing through droplets of beer hanging in the air like beads.

One of the Dwarves laid hands upon me. I twisted his head around, barely noting his surprised expression.

Roaring voices, the presence of the Horsemen was like mist at my back. The tavern doorway yawned before me, a circle of light. Someone appeared in it, then they were gone and I was through.

Horses. Tethered horses.

Horsemen! A wild part of my mind screamed.

I slashed the tethers, grabbing at a brown mare as they bucked and reared, panicked at my unconscious screaming.

I vaulted atop the horse. It struggled under me, even as I slammed my fist against the side of its head. As it shuffled in a half circle I slashed at its flanks with Tashifar's knife. Someone appeared in the doorway. The Prince?

"Murderer," I roared, and then I was gone.

I rode low, slashing again and again at its flanks, spurring the horse harder as I held its mane and screamed in its ear. Its hoofbeats sounded in my ear like a second drumming of my heart as the ground was eaten up underneath us.

I didn't look back, just screamed and slashed, urging more speed to take us away from the Horsemen following behind. In my imagination, the hoofbeats of my horse magnified to a thousand behind me.

Startled faces, Dwarf and Human looked up, and vanished as I passed

them. I was into the Downriver, the horse foaming with exhaustion, its flanks slick with blood and still I drove it.

The dark doorway of the Lodge appeared. I rode the horse within as it reared and scraped, trying to stop now that it had run out of room. As the horse struggled to keep its feet under it, I slid off, spinning around and around, waving the knife.

There was no one behind me. Nothing beyond the lodge. They hadn't managed to follow me.

I roared with relief and frustration, feeling my body weightless, a force beyond rage and madness filling me. I lurched and lunged as the horse galloped away and Arukh fled before me.

I howled.

Now that I knew who it was, it took me only a little longer to be sure.

I went back, I spoke to people, I asked questions and took answers.

Eventually, I returned again and made report to the Elders.

"The Horse King's son: Faron. He has the knife. A stable boy from the mud road saw him take two horses out to the marsh grass. One of them had a burden in a leather sack. When it passed by again it had no burden, but there was blood on its flank. He frequented the street Shaman, Copper Thoughts. It was his gold the Shaman carried. There is no doubt."

Not after I had seen his eyes. Looking into those glittering eyes, there'd been no doubt at all.

"Blinding," I told them, "is a man thing. Tongue cutting is a man trick. The Horsemen are like wolves, they kill by butchery. He has taken this and made it part of his sex."

They didn't say anything.

"It is not just the Mermaid," I said. "Others have died. Dwarves, Vampires, Kobolds, Hobgoblins.... I've gone back: for all the deaths, Horsemen can be found around. One Horseman, can be spied for some... the Prince."

I waited. They sat in a circle around me. Finally one of them laid a small leather pouch before me.

"You have done well," he said. "Thank you."

I examined the pouch. A dozen pieces. A reward? The Troll said they'd already paid their commission to him to hold.

"I can kill him for you." I offered again what I had already promised in the beginning.

"I can bring you his head," I promised and then flinched with involuntary unconscious shame.

I didn't know how I would do it, now that he was warned. But I would do it.

I needed it badly.

"That will not be necessary," their speaker told me. "We will see to these matters."

I felt bitter disappointment. I wanted him myself. Some part of me hungered for him. Somehow, this wasn't about gold. I needed him to be dead.

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"We will speak to his people."

I thought of Mira.

"And?" I asked.

"We will speak."

"What good will that do?" I asked angrily.

"It is our concern. Not yours," they reminded me.

Which was true as far as it went. But somehow I still needed to make him dead.

"Mothers' love be upon you," I said in formal Goblin style.

Khanstantin and the other Hobgoblins of the Brave Tohkzahli surrounded me. I'd gone searching for them.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Khanstantin easily. "Short life, quick death, somebody else and all that, Arukh. You have something to tell us?"

"I have the name of your killer," I told him.

Behind me, always behind me, Vhoroktik grunted.

"Which of the Horsemen is it?"

Khanstantin laughed at my expression.

"You're remarkably honest for an Arukh," he said. "All the names in your story, they were true names, so far as we can find."

"We wait. We hear the story of a mad Arukh who assaults a group of Horsemen and rides away shouting 'murderer.'"

He chuckled. "Such a thing, an Arukh shouting murder? It's like a fish complaining of pissing in the water."

"Then we hear about you, going again to the places you've already been, but this time asking about Horsemen."

I cocked my head to one side.

"Arrah?" I grunted.

Behind me, I could hear Vhoroktik hissing. Khanstantin glanced at her and gave a slight shake of his head. The hiss stopped.

"Honest for an Arukh," he said, "which means hardly honest at all. We told you to come to us with what you'd found. Instead, you try for the head yourself and then you go to the Selk. You're a fickle beast, aren't you?"

"Kill her," Vhoroktik snarled. "Kill the Arukh, kill them all, exterminate the brutes. Now!"

I stood calmly, betraying no emotion. I waited.

Khanstantin coughed and looked embarrassed.

"You have to admit," he told me apologetically, "hers is a most sensible point of view."

I grunted.

"And held by many," he said.

"But little acted upon," I replied.

He shrugged, half smiling at my apparent confidence.

"It is the Arukh who rides with them," Vhoroktik growled. "She let him live."

"No," I said.

Khanstantin and the others looked interested.

"It is the Prince," I said. "The son of the King of Humans. The son of the King of the Horsemen."

Khanstantin nodded.

"Tell us how you know this for certain?" he asked.

On my own, I returned to the Lodge and waited for the meal drums to pound. The little Arukh had found a shell comb, someplace, and as I sat and thought, I allowed her to groom me.

The Horse men, so far as I could see, were loyal to the Prince.

Why?

Perhaps they didn't know what he was?

I didn't credit that. I'd been able to find him, and I'd made sure other peoples knew of him. I didn't believe his own people wouldn't know.

What then?

Perhaps it was as simple as the fact that he preyed on other peoples? On Kobolds and Vampires and Mermaids.

But he'd preyed on humans as well on the street of Joy.

But not the same humans, I thought suddenly. Not his own people, but different humans.

The Horsemen stood with him because he didn't hunt among them.

That was an interesting thought. I played with it for a while.

It occurred to me suddenly that the simplest way to kill him, might be to murder a Horseman, or Horsewoman if they had such, in the way that he killed. They would find the body, and find his marks. Surely they couldn't tolerate the fact that he was hunting among them.

A thought of the Mermaids flitted through my mind.

Murder and mutilation, a horrible death of many wounds, gibbering madness and lust atop a mauled corpse. What would it be like to kill like that? To die like that? My stomach twisted.

And if it didn't work? What then? A stupid useless death and blood on my hands, and perhaps the Prince with someone or something else to blame his crimes on.

And if I did this thing, I thought, would I be any better than the Prince? Perhaps within myself, but what did that matter? So far as any might see, I would be no different.

I would become the Arukh I'd been set to hunt.

It struck me as monstrously unfair that the Prince would be tolerated for his atrocities.

The more I thought of it, the more things seemed able to go wrong. The more impractical the scheme became.

And there would be the unbearable taint. A taint even more unbearable because it was expected of us. Of abominations.

"What are our lives?" I complained out loud. "But fodder in other peoples' wars."

The young Arukh looked at me, eyes widening as she stared. She paused in her grooming.

"How are we ever free, when others spend our lives like coins for their own purposes?"

"They're no better than we are. It is not right," I said, "that they should look upon us, and despise us for sins that they commit. Why should they judge us? Why should they not be judged? What makes them see us as less than they? They see little more than tools to use and discard."

"How was it decreed," I asked, "that we could be only what they said we were? And why should we abide this law above others? Who made this law?"

"Why should we kill for others wishes? Is that a good enough reason to kill? Or is it no reason at all? What are our lives but shadows clutched as if in thieving hands? What are our deaths but the whims of strangers?"

"Perhaps we should choose our own ways, make our own Kingdom, be something..." I ran out of words, "...something... more."

"Orc Nation," she whispered softly, interrupting my thoughts, her eyes almost shining.

I looked at her, paying attention to her for the first time. Orc Nation? Where had she come up with that?

She stared back.

She was mad, I thought again. I should just kill her.

The meal drums started.

"Arrah," I said finally, and walked away.

I watched from the sagging roof of an abandoned building partially torn down. The little Arukh and I held the highest point, but there was a crowd of spectators around, none standing too close. Everywhere that was safe, people of all sorts watched the fight. The group near me was a mixture of distaff races, wild Humans and totemless Dwarves, fugitive Kobolds and threadbare Hobgoblins. Some stood together in small groups, others alone.

Even as I looked, I could see watchers on other higher buildings, Dwarves and Vampires, officers and leaders surveying their work.

It was another battle. It had been coming for days, the whole city holding its breath as Horsemen and Vampires cantered along different streets, glancing sidelong, waiting for a sign. What sign? Challenge or weakness? I guessed they'd hardly knew themselves.

Dwarves had marched in phalanxes, blowing their horns, waving their weapons. They pulled whole streets down, evicting waves of refugees as they tried to shape the land itself as a weapon to defeat Vampires.

The great flat plain of the Downriver seemingly emptied out, as anyone who could, retreated to the centres of their cities. Even the Arukh tended to stay in their lodges.

The weather had turned wet, rain turning many streets to mud. Some said this gave advantage to the Vampires, where cattle plodded easier than horses. Others said it hindered both.

It was light morning when the word came, waking us in the Lodge. Dwarves' choosing then, or perhaps Horsemens'. A bad time for Vampires, who preferred the night.

Was the Cull out there somewhere? Waiting to choose the dead? I couldn't see her.

The Prince hadn't come out of the Human Kingdom since my attack. He'd stayed well away and sheltered by other Humans. But for Tashifar, no other Arukh was even allowed in the same room.

I had waited and watched.

I'd skirted the edges of the Human Kingdom. I'd asked questions. I fantasized about plucking him with an arrow from a distance, but I wasn't

a good enough archer. I conceived fantastic traps to separate him from his allies and deliver him into my hands.

I waited.

He was a war leader, I found. Him, with Tashifar at his side, in the thick of every battle.

The battle from my vantage point looked different from ones I'd been in.

Always from within it had been a howling desperate mess. Here, free from desperation and fear, I could study it.

"It makes a pattern," I said out loud.

The little Arukh glanced at me nervously, her face colouring, and then turned away to watch the battle. I didn't think she understood me.

Was it always like that? I wondered. I tried to think back to the battles I'd been in, to imagine what they would have looked like from a vantage point like this.

I felt pieces slide together in my mind, as I put together the patterns that they must have made.

War was only senseless when you were inside it, I realized suddenly. Step back, look down, and it fell together in recognizable patterns and purposes. Opposing patterns that twined together like serpents rutting. Patterns of intention and contention.

I'd planned to wait for a battle and join it, to find him in it and kill him. Now that I was actually watching it, and remembering what it was like inside, I felt little incentive to enter it. More likely I'd be killed before I reached the Prince, or killed trying to get out again.

I watched and waited. Perhaps a moment would come that I might take advantage of.

It looked like numbers had been equal, but the Vampires were taking the worst of it. The Horsemen had them harried against a long wall that ran the length of the broad boulevard, as they swept back and forth across the field killing everything in their path.

The Vampires were losing. Hemmed in and harried, the Horsemens' tactics had them caged. They were unable to move effectively, and were slowly being chopped to pieces. Their skill and bravery availed them nothing.

I noticed that they were trying to use their Arukh troops for defense, forming them into phalanxes to try to blunt the Horsemen, the way the Dwarves used their own phalanxes to thwart the charges of mounted Vampires.

It was partially successful. Arukh phalanxes pushed the Horsemen away, but as they met Dwarf phalanxes they tended to disintegrate, fighting in the old style.

"The Vampires are learning," I spoke aloud. "They're learning how to fight against the Horsemen. But not fast enough."

"Will they take this defeat as a failure of their new tactics and abandon them?" I wondered. "Or would they keep on trying? You can't tell with Vampires."

"Arrah?" the little Arukh said softly.

I glanced at her.

She shrugged.

A boiling of motion in one section of the field caught my eye. Horsemen swept boldly into something that chewed them up mercilessly.

I stared, fascinated, trying to resolve that sudden flurry of violence into something like a pattern. The Horsemen floundered and their horses reared as they seemed suddenly to be surrounded by... Hobgoblins?

The Brave Tohkzahli, Khanstantin and Vhoroktik and their band.

Had they been there all along? Or had they just joined the battle?

And how could they stand against Horsemen? I forgot the rest of the battle, and focused exclusively on them as they began to carve their way across the battlefield, keeping together in a tight group.

Squadrons of Horsemen rode up to them, were abruptly swallowed and pulled down.

How were they doing that?

They kept together like a Dwarf Phalanx, a wall of knives and spears. I'd never seen Goblins or Hobgoblins fight that way. I watched as a trio of howling bravos rode against them, pellmell and yelling.

The Phalanx didn't hold, it seemed to disintegrate along it's left side thinning out, the right holding strong. The Horsemen rode down the left, even as they did so, I saw the right side seem to turn about itself,

Hobgoblins rushing in at the left, their formation tightening. The charge of the Horsemen slowed and stopped, even as they found themselves in the middle of a circle of spears. They went down.

The Phalanx moved swiftly across the battlefield, cutting down Horsemen, killing all out of proportion to their numbers. I began to make out individuals among them. Vhoroktik, overthrowing a horse and rider with main strength. Khanstantin, his spear flashing and dancing, barking out orders.

They were very good. Frighteningly good.

When I'd met them, I'd had some hidden thought that if it had come down to it, I could beat them and escape. I realized now, that I'd have had no chance.

Around them, the battle seemed to disintegrate. A phalanx of Dwarves broke off from where they were hemming Vampires in and converged upon the Brave Tohkzahli. There was bloody contact once, twice, three times, and then the phalanxes moved away from each other, the Dwarves bleeding visibly, as the Brave Tohkzahli drove towards the Horsemen.

Behind them the Vampires threw themselves at the weakened, extended line of Dwarves and broke loose, spilling out and charging freely.

The broken Dwarf phalanx wavered and then collapsed reforming into heavy circular groups that drifted together, even as the Arukh squadrons rolled over them.

The patterns I'd seen dissolved before my eyes as the battle disintegrated into a thousand vicious fights.

The Vampires were trying to gather, to pull themselves into some sort of order to rally and attack. The Horsemen abandoned their tactic of pursuing those running loose, and threw themselves at the developing formations of the Vampires.

I tried to pull back, to see patterns again. The main body of Horsemen met a force of Vampires. The Vampires moved left, trying to sweep around the Horsemen, even as the Horsemens' line extended left to catch them. Galloping waves of Horsemen were sweeping right trying to take the Vampires from behind, both groups trampling Dwarves underfoot.

"I see it, I see it," the little Arukh said excitedly. "I see the patterns."

And then the Hobgoblins hit.

The heart of the battle seemed to pulse and then explode in chaotic fighting as Horsemen and Vampires and Dwarves slashed and leaped and spun desperately searching for a friend to keep at their back.

With something approaching awe, I watched as the Hobgoblin phalanx forced it's way into the melee, changing from a wall to a spear point even as resistance hardened before it. Vhoroktik was well behind now, exhausted in the centre. Khanstantin and others were out in the lead.

As they drove forward, Khanstantin's group separated from the Tohkzahli main force and lanced amongst the hunters, even as the Horsemen and Dwarves began to push their fellows back.

Then I saw what Khanstantin was pushing for. The whole of the battle faded away and I saw only Khanstantin and his band. I felt them as if I could smell their sweat and hear their uttered curses as the rest of the world fell away from my notice. Before them, less than a dozen yards away, fought the Prince and his band, the Horsemen who directed the battle.

Even as I watched, Khanstantin and his companions fought well, hacking and stabbing at the mounted Vampires and their foot mercenaries with abandon.

But Khanstantin's band was dwindling, I could see. There weren't enough of them there to make their phalanx work.

The Prince caught sight of them, and with a shout, led a squad of half a dozen riders to bear down on them. He stopped short as his men swept forward and seemed to dissolve under a seething mass of blades.

He wheeled his horse in retreat, but even as he showed them his flank his horse squealed, a spear sticking from its flank. A lucky cast, for these were not throwing spears.

The horse staggered, venting it's high pitched scream. It seemed to sag, going on three legs even as a Hobgoblin rushed forward and stuck another spear in its belly. With a vicious downward stroke the Prince laid his head open as the horse fell.

The Prince kept his feet about him, staggering free as the body of the Horse hit the ground.

On unsteady feet, he backpedalled slipping in the mud, his bronze sword dragging in the ground, his eyes darting about wildly as he tried to orient himself. To understand what was happening to him

I growled in my throat. I could all but smell his death upon him. I could all but feel the sweat running down his back as he tried to understand how he had gone from being a destroying god, raining death, to some naked wanderer in a field of bloody madness.

My heart raced with anticipation.

A trio of Horsemen appeared in front of the Prince, thwarting the Hobgoblins. One took a spear in his belly and fell, his horse running free.

A Hobgoblin I recognized from before, Hahnuk, swung his axe at a horse and one of its legs vanished below the knee. The horse screamed shrilly, tossing its head as it tottered uncertainly on three legs where four should be. It went over, falling upon Hahnuk as he tried to flee it's death throes.

Khanstantin and his followers, but three now, swept around the dying horse, and suddenly, they were face to face with the Prince.

I saw his eyes go round, his face go white.

In my mind's eye, though his back was to me, I could see Khanstantin's fierce grin. I could almost hear his whispered promise.

Exquisitely slowly, the Prince dropped his sword and turned about to flee.

A spear whistled past his ear.

Khanstantin and the others leaped after him.

My heart seemed to slow with each footstep they took.

I saw the Prince taking two steps, and then three.

I saw Khanstantin climb over the dead mound of the Prince's horse.

I saw them coming after him, closing the distance with sharp knives flashing in the light.

The shadow of a horse fell over Khanstantin. Its bulk loomed large at his back. Khanstantin began to turn, and then he was ridden down.

Tashifar upon the horse smashed in the head of another Hobgoblin with his club. He left it behind even as the horse galloped three steps further to the Prince.

Tashifar leaned down to embrace the Prince, sweeping them atop the horse. It paused, seemed to sink down beneath the weight of the two of them, then it galloped off, leaving the remaining Hobgoblins to die beneath the flashing hooves of following horses.

So close.

I howled with resentment and frustration, felt the savage cry tear it's way out of my lungs as if it had been my teeth that had almost been upon the Prince's neck.

The little Arukh, terrified, almost fell from her perch as she climbed away from me. The spectators near us went silent, startled and frightened.

My cry rang across the field, and perhaps it was my imagination, but for a second it seemed like Tashifar and the Prince, as they galloped away on their horse, fleeing the battle...

It seemed as if for a second they turned and looked. As if across the field, our eyes met.

The Prince was gone. The Horsemens' battle fell apart without guidance.

The Brave Tohkzahli, their quarry lost, withdrew from the battle, and after a few skirmishes none dared follow them.

Horsemen seemed to quarrel with Dwarves over their reluctance to attack the Hobgoblins. I saw blows exchanged. Interesting.

Dwarves and Horsemen departed the field, as did Vampires. It was as if everyone had shed too much of their own blood to want the ground they'd soaked.

By the time the sun sat on its peak in the sky, the field was empty of all but the dead and wounded.

I made my way down.

Carrion birds and dogs were stealing onto the clearing now.

"Honest Arukh," a voice said behind me, full of bitter sarcasm. The little Arukh jumped. I didn't bother to turn.

"Mothers' love upon you," I said casually. My eyes searching around me.

There. There. And over there, the shadow coming from behind the wall.

How many others? Enough, I guessed.

"May you die a slow, slow, awful death," the voice said acidly. There was a long pause.

I waited.

"But by some other hand."

I turned.

It was one of the Hobgoblins of the Brave Tohkzahli. I eyed him critically. There was little trace of battle mud, or blood or fatigue upon him.

"We thought it was you there, hanging like some carrion bird to watch the feast in making."

"The Brave Tohkzahli fought well," I offered neutrally.

The little Arukh tugged at my elbow. I glanced. She was spotting them too. I gave her a tiny nod.

"We always do."

"And you yourself fought well?" My pitch rose a little, making the statement a question.

He laughed at my careful insult. "The Brave Tohkzahli always set aside watchers."

He used a Goblin word for watchers.

Watchers wasn't the right meaning. The Goblin word he used was for 'ones who show' or 'ones who teach.' But that didn't make sense.

'Ones who look upon and correct.' Yes. That made sense. And what would such a one be for in a place like this?

"I take it," I said thoughtfully, "that the Brave Tohkzahli seldom lose, and never lose twice."

He laughed bitterly. "Clever Arukh."

Behind me, the little Arukh whined nervously. She had sense enough not to draw her sword. Impractical weapon anywhere but a battlefield. In the time it would take her to have it out, they'd have us dead.

"Arrah," I said. "What do you want with us?"

"We could want nothing from an Arukh," he replied. "But if it is your wish to do so, we would not be offended if you walked in the direction

that we walked. Or at least, no more offended than is usual from the presence of an… abomination."

He used the Dwarf word, stumbling a little over the harsh consonants, rather than the Goblin word.

We. He was the only one in sight, but he was plainly telling us we were surrounded. I knew that already. The fact that he would say it told me that this was not an ambush.

"Perhaps we might walk elsewhere," I offered, "I hesitate to pollute your footsteps."

"That," he said bluntly, "would be hostile."

I nodded.

The little Arukh whined again. I rumbled low in my throat to calm her.

"You have said you do not want our deaths. For this, we would not offer hostility."

"It is well," he replied. He turned.

I could feel the little Arukh preparing to bolt. I set a hand lightly upon her, willing her to relax.

"Come," I told her.

We began walking, skirting around mounds of rubble and the remains of fires.

After a few moments, we joined the main group of the Brave Tohkzahli.

I didn't see them until I was almost on top of them. They'd found the wreck of a building, quickly cleared it into a makeshift fortress. I admired it with newly battle conscious eyes, almost invisible, many escape routes, and near impregnable. They'd copied many aspects of Dwarf fortification, and combined it with Goblin impulses.

I saw again why they were so very, very dangerous.

Many of the Brave Tohkzahli here had been in the battle. I saw some laying and panting, gasping with the fatigue and trembling that often followed fighting. Others made tea, another Dwarf affectation, or tended their own or companions wounds.

In the center of the Fortress was clustered a group that I took to be the leaders. Vhoroktik was among them. She didn't notice us at first. I had an

instant to watch her unawares. More than twice the size of the others, she still looked Hobgoblin and moved unaffectedly in Hobgoblin ways.

She saw me and stiffened.

"Arukh," she said.

The… 'watcher who corrects,' gave a perfunctory bow.

"This one watched, this one saw," he told them, indicating me.

"Oh," one of the leaders asked, "what did it see?"

I didn't know his name, and no one spoke it in my presence, but I noted a scar cutting across his lip, slurring his speech a little.

I cleared my throat.

"What is it you want of me?" I almost used the Dwarf honorific.

"We have fought and bled by your words," he replied. "Surely you can spare us a little more. So much has already been shed, it must be cheap now."

Words or blood? The threat was obvious.

"I saw the battle."

He nodded.

"I saw the Brave Tohkzahli fight."

Nods.

"They fought well. They fought bravely. They drove all who came before them."

"As it always is," he replied, cutting me off.

I was silent for a second.

"I saw Khanstantin."

They looked interested. Angry but attentive.

"His band cut the Prince from his horse, they cast the Prince into the mud."

Nod.

I tried to speak in the style of the awkward ballads that the Hobgoblins sometimes shared among themselves.

"The Prince looked upon Khanstantin as he looked upon the Prince. The Prince's bowels ran loose, he dropped his sword away and fled before Khanstantin's gaze.

"But even as Khanstantin raised his spear to end the Prince, he was cruelly taken from behind, ridden down unsuspecting by Horsemens' treachery."

I waited.

"Kill them," Vhoroktik said, her voice flat and dead. Her eyes burned.

My heart leaped.

There was a quiet grunting of approval. A small murmur of disavowal.

"Now?" a middle aged Hobgoblin asked.

Vhoroktik squinted, and then shrugged.

There was a bubbling of whispered conversation that we all heard perfectly well. They argued about what to do with us. I squatted in front of them, pretending to casually examine my gear.

After a moment, the little Arukh behind me did likewise.

I waited, heart starting to pound, sweat pooling down my back.

They had no good reason to hold us. No good reason to want us, and they knew it. I heard them argue it.

But they'd just come through a battle, they'd shed blood and lost lives, and somehow, in ways that they couldn't fully express, I was a part of this.

They had no use for me. But they were still unwilling to let me go.

Hobgoblins are like that. They'll pick things up, useless things like sticks or weeds or pieces of clay, and carry them around like treasure for hours or days at a time. Then they'll put them down for a second and wander off, forgetting all about them.

I have seen Hobgoblin women cradling stones to their breasts as if they were babies. Like Arukh, the Hobgoblins are barren, born only from the union of Goblins and Humans.

I decided to be patient. Sooner or later, they would forget about us and we would leave. If not... we'd need to save our strength for when it was needed.

"You saw where he died. Take us to him."

I nodded as I tightened the lacing on a piece of forearm guard.

Out on the battlefield, crows were beginning to gather.

We walked past corpses of beast and people. We were not quite prisoners. Weapons were not quite pointed at us. I could not help but stare at the bodies. Some laying slack almost whole and peaceful, others torn, contorted ruins.

They'd come all this way to die here. Had they realized it?

I didn't know.

One of the corpses moved.

I walked over. It was a human. Dressed like a Horseman, but I could tell he wasn't a true Horseman. His clothes didn't have the right look.

He lay curled up, half resting against the corpse of a bull. His blood mingling with the bull's in the mud around them.

A spear pierced his gut, ran out the backside of him. He held it, as if willing it not to go further, when it had already done its work. There was a rent in his side where he'd been torn open, green bile oozing trickles through dried blood.

Pieces of gear were scattered around. Waterskin. Clothes. As if he'd desperately been trying to repair his wound before he'd lost consciousness.

I wet a rag from his gear and cleaned the blood from his face. For a moment his eyes cleared and he caught my wrist.

"Don't kill me," he said.

"You are dying, man," I told him. "I haven't killed you. It was someone else."

"Ahh... mother," he whimpered, a spasm coming over him. "Water... so thirsty."

I held the skin to his lips. He gulped thirstily, half of it spilling from his mouth. He was bleeding again, the exertions setting it running.

"Help me," he begged.

"You are dying, man," I said again.

"Mother...," he whispered. "Mother don't let me go..."

He held tight to me, pulling me towards him with fading strength.

"Hold me," he whispered.

Slowly, he went still. His grip loosened and I pulled away. He was still breathing, although not well, and his blood pooled beneath him. Where the spear had pierced his side there was a foul smell, as if it had torn his guts open.

He wouldn't live to see the night.

His body shuddered. His eyes were closed.

He'd wake to pain again, I thought. He'd cry out for water, and for his mother.

I could cut his throat.

"Don't kill me," he'd begged me.

Did he know what he was asking?

Half conscious lips formed a word.

Mother? Who was his mother, I wondered. Who were his people? How was it that he was dying by measures alone in his own blood and shit? Why had he come to this place?

Uncomfortable with these thoughts, I left him behind.

Let him cry mother to someone else.

Vhoroktik stepped forward, glaring at me, she took his head in her hands and twisted roughly. There was an audible snap.

She stood and spat at my feet.

"Animal," she said to me.

I turned away.

I found Khanstantin's body. I wasn't sure it was his, it was face down in the street. I turned it over and cleaned the muck off his face.

They found and examined each of the Hobgoblin bodies.

None lived.

I stepped back and sat on the Prince's horse.

A carrion bird landed near Khanstantin. I hit it with a stone.

The Hobgoblins gathered around Khanstantin, tears running down their faces.

Khanstantin's head was turned towards me. His eyes were open. His jaw slack.

He looked surprised, I decided.

Vhoroktik knelt, lifting the body, cradling it against her massive breasts. Khanstantin looked so small in death.

She roared. The Hobgoblins around her jumped.

"Ayah," she howled, "Khanstantin is gone from us. How will we live? There is a hole in the world now. There is a hole in me.

"'Keep me,' I told him, 'keep me at your side, and I shall protect you.' But he didn't. When the time came he kept me back and went ahead to die alone."

She wept, tears running down her cheeks, sucking in great breaths and letting them dribble out in torrential sobs.

Many of the Hobgoblins wept. Strange coughing sounds filled the air around us as they wailed their grief.

"Would that I were dead," Vhoroktik howled, cradling his body in her arms and turning around and around, "dead in his place. Khanstantin is dead and I do not know how to live with him dead in the world."

Her eyes caught me and she stopped.

"He died," she snarled at me, "doing your work."

"If you'd killed the man, my Khanstantin would be with us now."

She put the body down, laying it gently at her side. Hobgoblins seemed to clear away from the two of us. A space opened between us, containing only us.

"Foul Arukh, despised, unwanted, abominations, excrement, stillbirths," she cursed me. "You taint the world with your existence."

"Arrah," I breathed almost inaudibly.

"Arrah Arukh!," she grunted, I could see her trembling, almost rocking from side to side, her head nodding as if barely stopped from bobbing automatically.

I stepped back.

She was working herself into a killing rage.

"Murderers, rapists..."

"Rape is bad," the little Arukh said.

That seemed to startle Vhoroktik, she turned to the little one. "Bad," she grunted, rocking freely, "Bad. Bad. BAD."

"Hurts," the little Arukh said. "Hurts inside and outside. Makes feel alone inside. Makes feel dead inside."

Vhoroktik shook her head, her anger seeming to dissipate. "Yes," she said. She focused on the little Arukh as if she'd never seen her before.

"Makes feel dead inside. Alone and dead," Vhoroktik repeated. "I feel it now, alone and dead. I should be dead, not him. I know how to be dead, he knew how to be alive. He is no good dead."

Now her body was swinging freely from side to side, in great slow arcs.

The little Arukh stepped closer. I watched fascinated.

They circled each other, their eyes locked, moving slowly in a parody of readying for combat.

"Bad thing," the little Arukh said. "Bad thing."

The little Arukh swung her hand out into the space between them. Vhoroktik caught it and held it.

They stopped.

"Bad thing," Vhoroktik said, her head bobbing. "Bad, bad thing."

"Arukh hurt."

"Make hurt."

"Feel hurt."

"Make hurt," Vhoroktik said this emphatically, anger creeping back into her voice. I could see her muscles tensing as she pulled on the little Arukh's arm.

"Make hurt," Vhoroktik spoke it like a promise.

I tensed.

The little Arukh allowed herself to be pulled closer.

"That one," she said, nodding at the body of Khanstantin. "he stop hurt."

Vhoroktik tilted her head.

"Stop hurt. Gone. Hurt again."

"Stop hurt, stop alone, stop dead," the little Arukh glanced toward Khanstantin, "that one." Vhoroktik followed her gaze.

"Khanstantin," she said softly.

"The one… Khanstantin," she said slowly, pronouncing it carefully,

trying to get used to the concept of beings with names, "he…"

I could see her struggle to try and put words together, they wouldn't come. She had no way to express herself.

"Arrah," said Vhoroktik, "yes."

"Arrah."

They were crouched, almost squatting now. Their bodies rocking back and forth in tandem.

The little Arukh pointed at me. They both stared.

"Mine," she said.

Vhoroktik's face darkened.

"Arukh."

"Mine."

"Arukh hurt," Vhoroktik insisted.

"Make feel, not hurt," the little Arukh said. "Not rape. Like Khanstantin. Feel live. Make not feel dead."

Emotions chased across Vhoroktik's face, she seemed to become thoughtful. Finally she shrugged.

"Arrah," she said.

"Arrah," the little Arukh replied.

They let go, stepping carefully away from each other. Vhoroktik stood, straightening slowly as she backed towards some Brave Tohkzahli.

I stared at her. I'd never seen an expression like that before. The little Arukh backed up until she was right against me. Until I felt her body against mine.

"The Mothers say that you should destroy the Arukh wherever you find it," Vhoroktik said without conviction. There was a muted chorus of agreement.

"The Brave Tohkzahli do the will of the Mothers," she said slowly. A stronger chorus.

"The Brave Tohkzahli suffer for the Mothers will." She was choosing her words very carefully.

Again, muted agreement.

"The Brave Tohkzahli have suffered enough today," she said. "Let us

bind our wounds and care for our dead. We must chant their songs to the Mother in Earth."

She made a move as if to pick something up. To pack things and go. She stopped and looked.

"The Mothers will must be done. The Mothers permit others to kill the Arukh. That is their will. We will not do it. Let others do it."

"You Arukh go away now. We Tohkzahli must care for our dead. It is no place for Arukh to be."

She picked up a leather sheet and covered Khanstantin's body in it. With exaggerated care, she rolled the body in the sheet, wrapping it.

The other Hobgoblins, taking their cue, ignored us, and self-consciously commenced their little activities.

I stepped back, the warm contact between the little Arukh's body and my own broke.

She hovered for a second.

"Mothers' love upon you," the little Arukh said.

Vhoroktik looked up, her expression strange. Whatever strange communion they shared, it was still there between them. She almost said something, and seemed to bite it back. She was silent for a second.

"Mothers' love upon you," Vhoroktik replied quickly, her face darkening with embarrassment. She looked down and away.

As we returned to the lodge, I couldn't stop staring at the little Arukh.

It seemed to make her nervous.

It was a simple inspiration. If the Brave Tohkzahli had almost slain the Prince, how much easier might it be for the Vampires? After all, they were already at war.

As we ate in Iron Pants' Lodge, the notion seemed to make more and more sense. Something was off with Iron Pants. He'd seemed to stare at us as he fed us. His gaze shifting from Arukh to Arukh, searching, coming to light upon me, again and again.

His companion, the younger Troll, had shifted on his feet as I came near, almost as if he was going to come and speak to us. But he didn't. I was satisfied. It is not always good to speak to Trolls.

Why kill the Prince myself, if I could have others do it for me? So long as it was done, I would be content.

Beyond the war, the Vampires had suffered at his hands. Had lost their own people to him. All I needed to do was show them.

I would have to speak to high Vampires.

That was a problem. They didn't speak to creatures like me, and their Inner City was forbidden to the Arukh. We were unclean to them.

The Cull was the answer, I decided. The Cull could see me into the Inner City, could show me a high Vampire, could make it listen, and possibly, could get me out alive again.

Screwing up my courage, I'd dragged the little one off with me, found the Cull and begged an audience. She'd listened to me with the absent-minded distraction of the Traditionals, as if not listening at all, but merely hearing my words.

In the end, she took my gold.

She'd taken us north again. We walked, this time around the outer kingdom, where tanners, gluers, bonecarvers and butchers plied their trade.

"This is the Inner City," she told me finally.

I looked around. It didn't seem different. It had the look of much of the rest of the Vampire city. Low slung wooden buildings, wide winding streets and alleys, all arranged haphazardly.

"Smell," she said.

I inhaled.

"It's different," I said. There wasn't the close, suffocating, smell of the tanneries and slaughterhouses. It was there, yes, but not immediate or overwhelming.

And if the wind changed direction? No, the ground here was higher, as it was in all the inner Kingdoms.

"Death is forbidden in the Inner City," she told me, explaining. "That is the law of Dreamers: nothing may die here."

I grunted.

"That is why your kind are forbidden here," she said. "You are creatures of unlife, born dead and defiled. You reek of it. You are... wrong. You do not belong in this world, and not in this place."

She didn't say anything else after that.

I watched fascinated as naked Traditionals and robed city dwellers moved among sacred cattle, going on errands I could not fathom. A few glanced at me and my companion, and then shrugged and moved on. I saw a few Dead Men, half Human-half Vampire not quite either, among them.

I stopped and stared at a group of Vampire children playing on a cow laying on a patch of grass. Its tail flicked at them with bored irritation as they leaped and danced around its limbs, and climbed over its body.

One of the children seemed heavier, than the others, its body somehow more massive, its movements slower and clumsier. Was this an Arukh? I wondered. I tried to see my own reflection in its blunt features.

"Come," the Cull said, pulling me away.

A passing dung minder glanced at us curiously, and then returned to pulling his sleigh loaded with excrement.

The buildings became more massive. Full lodges and halls, temples and ziggurats and walls, now all made of baked brick. They grew closer together, though the boulevards remained wide.

I examined the buildings carefully, as we walked. They seemed shabby, even in comparison with the ramshackle woodwork of the outer Vampire Kingdom.

The big lodges didn't even have roofs, just eaves running along the walls. Nowhere was the massive stonework of giants or cunning towers of dwarves.

"Here in the sacred place, the lesser races have nothing to teach the fair people," the Cull said. She grinned at me, and I suspected impenetrable layers of meaning in that obvious statement.

Sacred cattle grew fewer. I realized suddenly, that every sacred beast in the Inner City was accompanied by a Vampire, who groomed and guided, who tended to its needs. Other Vampires treated the tenders with exaggerated respect.

"Holy are these who lay with beasts," the Cull said, startling me. She

seemed amused.

She pulled me from the street and took me down an alley. It opened up into a great corral surrounded by wooden stands. Vampires thronged the stands, the low buzz of their conversation, the smell of their bodies, filled the air.

"Sit," the Cull said, gesturing to the stands.

Inside the coral, there was a bull and a dozen young naked Vampires. They were mixture of Traditional and city types, the Traditionals' hair being darker and wilder, their skins tending to be leathery from years exposed to the elements.

As we watched, the bull lowered its head and charged one of them, a city female by the look of her. She held still until it was almost upon her, and then grabbed its horns at the last minute.

The crowd roared as she lost her balance. The bull tossed its head. She swung left off one horn. The bull turned circles to try and bring her down as she bounced again and again off its flank.

Another city Vampire distracted the bull, allowing the female to slip off and away. He danced this way and that as it pursued him, always never quite where the bull lunged.

They all drew away now, leaving the bull in the centre. It shook its head, lowering its horns again as they danced around in an ever widening circle.

A Traditional stepped forward, her skin shining as if oiled. With high, exaggerated steps, she approached the bull, which seemed to lift its head to stare warily at her. Suddenly, it lowered its horns and charged. From where we were, we could hear the thunder of its hooves over the silenced crowd.

The Traditional went absolutely still as the bull pounded towards her, little clods of meadow flinging into the air behind it. Almost on top of her, it lunged forward to crush and gore.

In an astonishing movement almost too quick to follow, the Traditional seemed to leap upside down over the horns even as it tossed its head. I watched her body swing up in an arc, her feet insolently kicking the bull's hindquarter, and then up into the air again, as the bull bucked and

kicked, galloping in obvious confusion at its vanished prey. Hanging for a second in the air, the bull behind her, the Traditional spun twice more before her feet touched the ground and she walked casually away.

The crowd roared its approval, deafening us.

The other Vampires in the corral harried and distracted it. Keeping it from charging any particular target, while continuing to madden the creature. It lunged at one and then another, but they always danced out of its way and before it could settle on a charge, another would taunt it.

"The glory of youth," the Traditional said. She started talking to another naked Traditional, relating some dream she'd had about a fawn suckled by a cow. The other responded with a dream about a thighbone that grew leaves.

I listened to them for a while, but it was impenetrable. Full of shifting allusions as past dreams were explored and compared, meanings discussed, and symbols debated.

I went back to watching the bull dancers.

"You're Rughk?" someone asked.

I looked. Sitting a little ways apart from us was a male vampire. City bread by the look of him, he dressed in functional leather leggings and harness. Part of his left hand was missing, the scar old and well healed, and he had a small potbelly. I stared. I seldom saw potbellies on Vampires. Perhaps he had a little bit of Troll in him.

"You're Rughk, aren't you?" he asked again.

I nodded.

"We don't see many in here," he said.

I grunted. I didn't think he'd see any in here at all.

Once again the dancers were forming their circle. The bull shook its head. It seemed reluctant to charge.

"I hear Rughk can be pretty fast?"

"Fast enough," I replied.

The dancers taunted it, leaping close and slapping its sides.

"I hear Rughk can catch birds and arrows out of the air?"

"I've heard this too."

"Do you think a Rughk could do this?"

Abruptly, the bull turned and charged, its head so low that its nostrils seemed to brush the grass. Its victim, a lone female, froze. The bull didn't so much run, as plough through the air, its smashing hooves digging deep into the soil, flinging clods behind as it rushed forward.

This time I was watching carefully. Just as the bull was upon her, she reached out and firmly grabbed its horns. The bull tossed its head back, and the motion, with her own leap, catapulted her into the air to land on the bull's back.

That's what the first female had tried and failed at, I realized. Something hadn't been right. The bull had tossed its head the wrong way, or her timing had been off.

Here it was perfect, and once again, she sailed over the bull's back, folding up her body as it came down on the bull's hindquarters, and then leaping again into the air, propelled by the bull's own kick at the sudden temporary weight.

The crowd roared in appreciation, and so did I. It was absolutely beautiful.

The dancer spun three times in the air, coming down almost in a ball, before walking away with the slightest stagger.

"I used to do this all the time," the potbellied vampire told me. "A hundred upon a hundred leaps I made. Wild bulls, too, with sharpened horns. Not like this. Not with tamed animals."

A few feet away from us, the Cull continued her arcane discussions. I glanced at her. She paid us no attention.

The potbellied Vampire held up his maimed hand.

"No more though."

I nodded, not sure of what to say.

"So you think you could do that?" he asked. "Are you fast enough?"

The dancers ringed around the bull now, but it seemed tired and reluctant to charge again.

"It looks like more than speed," I said, equivocally.

"Yes," he said. "It takes much skill. You have to practically do it from birth."

I grunted.

As we watched, the dancers seemed to abandon trying to incite the bull. They still leaped around it, but now caressing, as if trying to calm and relax it.

By degrees, the fight went out of it. It stopped responding angrily to their touches and seemed to calm, accepting or ignoring their presence.

"Probably too much for a Rughk," he decided, ending the one sided conversation.

One by one, the bull dancers began to feed off the becalmed animal. It accepted their attentions dumbly.

The dance was apparently over. I wondered how long it had been going on before we'd come here. How many times had it been incited to charge, how many leaps before it had fallen into exhaustion.

The crowd in the stands showed no inclination to leave. Instead, many simply turned to discussing the bull and each of the dancers, exchanging opinions and assessments.

I listened with half an ear. I needn't have watched the dancers at all. The conversations would have told me more than eyes ever could.

The Cull began to walk away. I nudged the little Arukh, and we scrambled from our seats to follow her. She halted.

"No," she said turning back to us.

"You promised," I insisted, "we have your word that you will see us safely."

"It is inconsequential," she said, "I have errands. I must consult with ancestors in waking dreams. Rughk may not attend with me. The wind is not in that direction. I shall return when the wind blows favourably."

"How long?" I insisted.

She shook her head.

"Time is without meaning in the real world," she replied. "When time turns again, our paths may cross."

A cold, sinking sensation opened in the pit of my stomach. No good would come of being abandoned in a place forbidden to us.

"This one," she said, gesturing to the other Traditional, "will see to you in my absence. For you, for all things, he shall be me."

The other Traditional glanced in our direction, seeming not even to notice us.

With careful exaggeration, the Cull turned to the other Traditional.

"Mind these as you would a child, or a favoured toy," she said, pronouncing slowly and carefully for our apparent benefit, "I shall return for them before the sun rises."

Then she walked off.

I began to follow, but the Traditional appeared in front of me, still casually ignoring us. I tried to step around without touching him, but somehow, the Traditional always seemed to be where I wanted to go.

Irritated, I snarled and swung. The Traditional hardly seemed to move, but my fist slipped through empty air and I stumbled forward.

His calm eyes passed over me, seeing and not seeing. Vaguely amused, but not quite at me.

The little Arukh was right behind me.

"Kill?" she whispered. The Traditional cocked his head, not quite deigning to hear the words, but seeming to listen as to a bird song.

She thought the two of us together could take him. I didn't think so. And even if we could, then what?

The Cull was gone.

The Traditional's vague secret smile seemed to increase a little, as if the world had become an incrementally funnier place.

I sighed.

"Honourable Sir," I said, employing Dwarf honorifics. I didn't know how to call Traditionals. "What would you have of us?"

For a second, the Traditional's distracted gaze seemed to pass over us in momentary acknowledgement of our existence. He turned his back on us, took three steps, and stopped, not quite waiting.

We followed. He began moving again.

In a small clearing a dozen Vampires had gathered around two reclining cattle. They were all young, some Traditionals, some southern, some city bloods.

They paused from their discussions to look us over.

"Do not touch the beasts," a young male warned me. I looked closer. He wasn't really a full Traditional, though his skin was sunbeaten and he walked naked. Probably a city vampire. His skin had been oiled until it shone. A bull dancer?

I stood, staring at them. There were beast tenders, in their simple tunics. Dung minders in their trousers and aprons. City dwellers, wearing trousers, and southern vampires, bedecked in elaborate robes.

"You are Rughk?" a beast tender said.

I nodded.

"So that's what they grow up to be," he said. "I'd wondered what they might turn out like."

The male who'd spoken to me first stood and walked over, circling me with amused inspection. The little Arukh cowered and cringed, but I stood fast.

"Rughk," he said, "born small, grow fast. Clumsy children. I am surprised that any live at all."

"We live," I replied.

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you live?" he asked, leaning his body against mine. He put something between my lips. "Why do you bother? You must know that nothing in the world wants you."

"Eat," he commanded.

I swallowed. Mushroom. Light and tasteless.

"Do you live?" he wondered, "Or do you merely seem to live? Rughk have no soul, no dreams, they are like this city. Stones piled together to give the appearance of something, then one day, the stones fall apart and there is nothing."

One of the city Vampires cleared its throat. It stroked its genitals in its leather trousers.

"We have been discussing the real and the unreal," he told me. "Our kith hold that all that is real is the spirit and the earth, and all else is of the intercourse between the two."

"Buildings pass, and flesh and fire pass," the naked oiled vampire said.

He slipped his hand beneath my jacket, feeling my bare skin. "Spirit is real, wind and water are real, the stones are real."

The fastenings seemed to come loose one after the other, and I felt it slide off my shoulder.

I looked to the Traditional for assistance. He reclined a few feet away, oblivious to my presence, reflecting upon some past dream.

"We are the emanations of real things, and will pass back and forth among them."

His hands explored me. His voice was soft and seductive.

"You are a made thing. Is there anything of the real in you? Or will you just fall apart one day?"

He bent forward to sniff my neck.

"Don't," I said, my heart was pounding. "Don't touch me."

The little Arukh was whimpering fearfully.

I felt no threat from them, but they made me feel strange, as if they were too close. As if they took intimacies I had not imagined.

Lacings slipped apart, and things fell away from me. I felt nothing, except in some strange way, I fancied myself like that sea bug the Selk had shown me. Arukh of the sea, I'd called it. I felt like that creature, like its... like my shell was being torn from me.

He pulled his head back.

The little Arukh tried to bolt, but somehow, the Traditional drifted in front of the place she was running. She turned and turned again, returning to my back.

The naked vampire licked between my breasts. I swallowed, trying to keep from trembling. His jaw worked, his tongue lapping up along my neck.

"The Trolls, I am told," he whispered, "have a saying. That there are only two kinds of beings: Ones you talk to and ones you eat."

Hot breath in my ear.

"I speak," I said quickly.

"You make noises that sound like words," he said. "But is there any

meaning? Does anyone hear you? Does anyone listen? Does anyone speak to you? Or is it just... noise in the emptiness."

"Let the creature be," one of the beast tenders said. "It's foolish to play with such things. It is unreal."

"Why not?" a city Vampire said. "Let it speak if it can. Perhaps it will amuse us."

The beast tender spat.

"What of it, Rughk? What is real to a creature without soul?"

They were all looking at me.

The naked Vampire stepped back.

The Traditional draped himself over me, his chin resting on my shoulder. I glanced at him, saw only amused interest. He wasn't even looking at me. For him, I was not a being. I had no more reality, no more meaning than a breeze or a piece of wood. Or perhaps even less than that.

What was real?

"Now," I said. "That is real. This moment. This place. These things are real."

The Traditional shifted behind me. I could feel his body pressing against mine for a second, our bare flesh rubbing against each other.

"Only now?" the beast tender asked. "What of other moments, other places."

I'd interested them, for a few seconds at least.

"They're real," I whispered, my throat was dry. The taste of cool water from a brook near the old Troll's place was in my mind. That was so long ago, but suddenly, I could taste it again. "Other places I've been, other times I've known. That's real too."

I paused.

"I've drunk, felt water down my throat. Eaten, felt it on my tongue and in my belly. I've felt hurt and seen my blood run from wounds. All these things are real to me. I know nothing else."

I waited.

They glanced at each other.

There was a burst of tittering laughter.

"Oh we've got it wrong," the naked male said. He slid from his feet, reclining over one of the cattle in a single graceful motion. "The Rughk only is real."

He ran his hands along its flank, caressing it. His fingers tracing the shapes of old blood wounds in its hide.

"Foolish Rughk, to be the only real thing in an unreal world? Do you think that is why the rest of the world hates you so much?"

"I didn't mean that," I said quickly. I was afraid of them, but becoming angry. Memories of anger flowed through me. Black rage. Flat rocks. New moon.

Stop. I tried to focus on the scene before me. My heart was racing.

"Oh," he said, stroking the beast, "and what of the sacred beast? Is it real if you are not drinking its blood?"

His face wrinkled with distaste.

"Is it real if you are not... eating its flesh?"

"No," I said, feeling flushed and angry, "it's real."

"Two real things," said the beast tender.

"All things are real," I snapped. "You, me, the trees and grass, buildings. Everything but dreams."

They stopped, shocked. I began to fear that I'd gone too far.

I was shocked too. A strange insight had come over me. The beast was as real as I was. When I was fighting in the war for my life, it was... what? Eating grass? Being groomed? Whatever it had been doing, wherever it had been, it had been there. It had gone on with its life without notice or attention to my own.

They all had. All their lives were real. They'd ridden and laughed and drank and had sex. They'd been born, just like I'd been, and grown as I had, and passed day after day, as I had. They had passed the same days, the same moments. Wherever I'd been, whatever I'd done, they too had existed in those moments in some other place, doing things, being things.

It was too big a thought, it felt like it wouldn't fit into my head, but I didn't know how to get it out. For a moment, I felt like the little Arukh, almost bursting with words with ideas that would not come out.

They laughed.

Had I been speaking? My thoughts raced along, but I couldn't seem to catch up with them.

I shrugged off the traditional's weight, and he was suddenly gone.

I stared at them helplessly, caught in the jaws of this vast idea. I stared at them, and saw them in a way I'd never seen before, that I couldn't describe. It was as if I wasn't just seeing them, but seeing their past and future with them. Seeing the inside of them as well as the outside. It was as if I saw them and not just what they looked like. Heard them, and not just the sounds they made.

"Arrah," I grunted. I turned and staggered away. My head felt strange, I held it in my hands, as if trying to keep it from falling apart.

They called after me. I ignored them, I didn't want to hear any more. I didn't want to hear them.

I felt the little Arukh pulling at me. Her whimpering was in my ears. I was lying down, crouched into a ball. How did I get there? I allowed her to pull my resisting muscles, as she dragged me to my feet. I felt both massive and weightless.

I looked at her, her face full of fear and tension.

And suddenly, I was back watching her after the rape, silently watching her cry and howl. I recoiled. The two images, her now and her then, existing together before me.

In the reflections of her eyes I could see myself.

I'd watched her, I thought suddenly. On the rooftop, she'd silently watched me cry and howl, as if we were distorted reflections of each other in muddy water. Weeping and watching, above and below. Like when I saw the Mermaids, the moon in the sky and in the river together, reflections of each other. Everything was a reflection of everything else.

We were the same person, I realized, with hideous clarity. She was me and I was her, and we'd shared the same moments, living on mirror sides of each instant, and the knowledge was almost too big for my head.

Vhoroktik appeared in my mind. I was watching again that strange communion she'd had with the little Arukh. Shared pain opening to shared knowledge.

The nest, the frantic desperation as I tore at the nest, terrified of what I

would find, wanting them to be alive, desperate for even one of them to be alive. They'd killed them all, and I was too late. I couldn't stop them. They'd come and killed the goblins who had never done them harm. I tore at the nest, but every one I found was dead. I found Mothers...

They are not like him at all. Not patient. Their traps are dangerous and they almost catch me. They are after me and I am struggling and the ice is breaking under me, and I am going to die.

I watched them rape her, again and again, and I listened to her howl, and it was the sound that I made, and...

I remembered that pain, the soul aching wound that seemed endless and unbearable. My fingers twisted, feeling the remembered shape of the heavy rock.

I lunged away, breaking unfelt grip, staggering through the night. My thighs wet with blood. Weeping and weeping in terrible pain I couldn't name, stopping to touch myself, licking away the blood on my fingers, but there was always more blood and I was dying and I knew it and he'd killed me finally and left me to die and I felt the rock in my hand and held it to my heart and crawling back to find him sleeping I lifted the rock and lifted the rock and lifted the rock and there was blood everywhere....

I vomited.

The little Arukh was beside me and there was no rock in my hands and no blood, no blood between my legs, no blood anywhere. I shook my head angrily.

No rock, I told myself. No blood. That was long ago. It wasn't real any more.

"Get out of me," I snarled angrily, or thought I did, shoving the little Arukh away.

She melted away from my push like a Traditional, seeming to stand unmoved only a foot or so from me.

I staggered away. The Traditional appeared in front of me. His eyes found me and I knew I was real because he was seeing me. I was seeing myself reflected in his eyes. I lunged like the bull, feeling dirt beneath my hooves.

I thought I felt him for a second, but then he was gone. I weaved blindly

this way and that. Trying to hold my head together, trying to keep me inside and everything else outside.

A sacred beast appeared in front of me. I reeled, tottering away from it's staring eyes, from its realness.

Finally, I crawled to the side of a building. It too was real, but without the palpable existence of living creatures. I curled into a ball, holding my head. I tried to make the ideas go away.

Something touched me. The little Arukh. I tried to ignore her, but somehow my hands found hers and held them tight.

"Get up," she was whispering desperately over and over. "Get up or you will die."

I couldn't move any more.

"Get up," she whispered, "or they will kill us."

"She's mad," a voice said finally.

"The statement lacks meaning and contributes nothing. Madness is what the Rughk are," another voice replied.

I recognized the voice. The Cull.

I opened one eye. The Cull was back. As was the Traditional. And the naked Vampire and a couple of others. They stared at us.

I unfolded myself enough to stare back up at them.

They were still real, still more real than real, still vibrating, radiant, dense with reality. But it was bearable now.

I found myself thinking of Vhoroktik again, of how the Hobgoblins had been around her. They'd acted like...she'd belonged among them.

Even different as they were from each other, I could tell they belonged together, these Vampires.

I could not see myself belonging the way they did. Not to them. Not to Hobgoblins. Not to other Arukh. Arukh belonged to nothing. The cold knowledge made me shiver.

"What use is there to feed dreams to the soulless?" the Cull asked lightly.

Was there something like anger in her voice?

The naked Vampire, his oiled body glistening in the moonlight,

shrugged. I watched the play of muscles on his body.

"It was amusing," he replied petulantly. "I would do it again."

"You will never do it again," the Cull snapped.

Songs, I thought, songs were real. I could not see them, or bite them, I could not touch them or eat them or hurt them. But they were real enough. In the back of my mind I heard the haunting strains of the song of Ara. Not any part of it, but the whole thing, sitting there all as one.

The Cull shrugged, as if I'd spoken. Had I spoken? She knelt down before me.

"Rughk," she asked, "where are you?"

I blinked at the question.

"Here."

"Do you know who I am?"

I nodded.

"Do you know who you are?"

I hesitated, uncertain for an instant.

"The High Vampires will see you," she told me, speaking slowly and carefully. "They will listen to your story."

I had the sudden impression that there were layers of meaning to these simple statements. That I could almost perceive them, and if I just tried a little harder, I could understand everything she was saying.

"Your story," she repeated.

The High Vampires. The story. The Prince. The Mermaid. And suddenly, for just a second, it went clear in my head, the awful wrongness of it all, not just the Mermaid, but all the lives the Prince had ended, all the real women with their own lives, with their own moments, all full of realness, made into ragged red ruins by the Prince.

"It's not just the Mermaid," I said out loud. I was certain that I'd spoken aloud.

They glanced at each other.

And not just the Prince, I realized suddenly. The little Arukh loomed in my mind. Khanstantin and Vhoroktik, and the Hobgoblins. The wounded

man on the battlefield. The meat seller who I'd seen dead later. And all the ones I'd killed myself, the lives I'd ended and never thought about.

I grunted and tried to stuff it all back. Not to think of it all. People lived and died all the time.

The Prince, I thought, the Prince must die. I focused on him, trying to make it all fit together again. Gradually, the wildness in my mind subsided.

I climbed to my feet.

Staring at the naked Vampire I said, "Songs are real. I hear them even after they are finished."

"Clever animal," he said. "At least it knows how to talk."

He turned away.

I sat before the massive horned skull of a beast at the end of the hall of the Vampires of the Thundering Dawn Lineage. It was a vast building, only partially roofed, its walls were yet higher than a giant but no giant had built this rude place. Around the inside edges of the building, small ceremonial fires blazed. My back was to them, but I could see the flickering shadows they cast.

A Vampire, elaborately bedecked in silken robes sat before me. Others stood immobile, in a semicircle around us. The Cull, death herself, stood at my back, the little Arukh at her feet.

They'd made me wait still longer, forcing me to groom, pouring water and oils over my body to purify me for their presence. It had helped clarify my mind, had focused me on the story I was to tell.

The Dawn Lineage was a mixed family, half plains dwellers, half city breeds.

The Vampire that sat before me was a representative of that uneasy mixture. He wore the robes and collars of the city folk, but his gestures and formality was that of the great beast riders. He'd spent much of his youth out on the plains, I thought.

Vampires paid little attention to their young, at least until they made it past puberty.

The Prince had been able to kill almost at will among them until he had

gone too far.

"Zhar Yne," I said. "I hope she is doing well."

"My daughter," he answered, "I spoke to her in the land of dreams, just yesterday. I am surprised she did not mention such a thing as you. Did you know her?"

His daughter had died over a month ago, gutted like a trout. Her family was among the most influential in the Vampire realm, and certainly the most powerful of the victims' families.

"I know of her death. I know who made her death."

He looked at me, eyes strangely distant and dreaming the way so many beast riders gazes are.

"Tell me."

So I told him. I told him of the Mermaid. Of the trail of bodies leading from one realm to another. I told him of iron knives and bloody horses and street shamans with too much gold. I told him every bit of it, and in the end, told him the name.

I told it much better, I realized, than I'd told Khanstantin and his band. Then I'd hesitated, wandering back and forth, telling pieces out of order, and pieces that hadn't mattered at all. They'd questioned and interrupted.

There were no interruptions. I simply spoke. The telling to Khanstantin had helped to put it together in my mind. They'd made it easier for me to tell as a story.

I spoke of Khanstantin, and of his death. Finally, I ran out of things to say.

There was period of silence.

"Ah," he said finally. "And what is this to us?"

I shrugged.

"You make war," I said simply. "There is one among your enemies who deserves especial killing. Kill him."

"You instruct us in both strategy and murder," the Vampire said acidly. "We take offence. Matters are more complex than your simple lusts."

"It is your daughter."

He shrugged.

"It is your blood, and the blood of your line that has been spilled. Avenge it," I insisted.

He stared at me. Seconds rolled by.

"Your people have no children of your own, is that right?" he asked finally.

I nodded, puzzled.

"When one of you is born to one of our women, we call it an 'Uruch', a miscarriage, an abortion. All the women of the lineage wail and comfort the mother for her misfortune. Sometimes it is called 'Rughk', vomit, a shedding of a tumour, an expulsion of evil gatherings from the body," he said this with no more inflection than he might have used to remark upon the weather.

"I have heard," I answered "that women of many lineages prefer to bear Rughk first because it is an easier birth than Vampire. I have even heard that some bear nothing but Rughk, as it is so easy to carry, and saves them from the torture of bearing their own."

"Perverse," he made a face, causing his long fangs to protrude, "You speak to wound me, where I merely speak the truth we both know. You are a wicked creature. You are less than the worms and beetles of the earth."

"We call you these things because that is what you are: beings without souls. That is why you can bear no children of your own. For you death is your beginning and your end, your 'life' nothing more than a mirage, an illusion of time and space."

"Understand that for us, only our body may cease, our spirit goes on to live in the land of dreams. My daughter is not dead."

"Do you care for her body? Someone tore the life from it," I snapped.

"Indeed. You might care for a knife while it is whole, and defend yourself against any who might steal or break it. But once it is broken why should you keep it? Who should defend it for you then? For what?"

He paused, gathering his thoughts.

"But, I thank you for the knowledge," he said more calmly. Dismissing me.

"What will you do?"

"I will speak of this to my daughter. She will be amused."

"And the Human Princeling?"

"What of it? It no longer hunts in our realm."

"He wars against you," I argued.

"The war is not your concern. It will end soon, before it truly begins."

"It has already begun," I said angrily, "and you're losing."

The Cull spoke.

"We have dreamed of the war. You are right. If there the war between the Fair peoples and the Horsemen goes on, the Fair peoples will lose."

"What?" I twisted to look at the Cull. I recalled the battles I'd witnessed or heard of. Each time, the Vampires had been cut to pieces. She had watched those battles as well.

"Do not speak of such in front of animals," the robed Vampire warned. There was a nervous shifting of the Vampires around us, but they remained silent.

"Doom upon us all if the war comes," the Cull said. "Not even the Traditional people will make a difference. Best to avoid the war."

"You surrender?" I asked. "You think you'll be safe with their boots on your necks? The Horsemen are wolves, they know no mercy."

"Not surrender," the Cull replied. "We make peace. We agree not to kill each other. It is a thing that real people do. Rughk would not understand."

"The Horsemen will kill you. They kill as they wish."

"They cannot kill all," the Cull told the audience, "they have been shown that. They hesitate, uncertain of their power."

Khanstantin, I realized, with a moment of insight. Khanstantin's band had changed things. Their entry into the battle had changed everything. It had stolen the Horsemen's confidence.

The Horsemen and Dwarves might war against the Vampires and win. But what about the other Kingdoms? Who would win if the Goblin Mothers entered the war?

What had the Kobolds said so long ago? There'd been peace bought by the Dwarves with the Kobold's Secret Kingdom, to keep it from the war.

The Dwarves and Horsemen wanted to limit it, to keep the war from spilling its banks, and drowning them all.

"All the Horsemen want is living space," the robed Vampire offered, as if acquiescing in the Cull's words. "We will give it to them and they will be peaceful with us. They are our brothers who ride. They won't fight us. We won't fight them. Without the Horsemen, the Dwarves lack strength. They will abandon their war."

"And the Prince?"

"He is in their house. They may deal with their Prince on their own. Sooner or later they must see him for what he is."

I snarled deep down in my throat. My lips parted to show the beginnings of heavy canines.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked them, turning from the Cull to the Thundering Dawn Vampire. "Why did you listen to my story?"

"Because you came to tell it," the seated Vampire replied easily. "Stories are told. Did you imagine that we should be ruled by a tale told by an Uruch. Your words are only sound and fury, signifying nothing more than meaningless emptiness."

"Blood is spilled!"

"That is the way of blood."

"Cowards," I spat.

Even as I said the word, I knew it was a terrible mistake. His face turned to stone. He made a gesture, and I heard sudden rustling around me.

"I will say this: When I found the body I was mad with grief, and I made it known that no more of our folk should die like this. Were I still ruled by such grief I might cast the stones of war, heeding no consequences."

"Then why..." I began, but he cut me off.

"Vengeance," he said irritably, "revenge, anger, hatred, lust, there is nothing inside you. You are without soul, and your death will not matter, even to you. But it is not your fault, what you are. You have done me a small service, I shall do you a small one."

Death.

I froze, glancing around at the Vampires. My heart started to pound as I tried to guess which one would move first, which way I should go.

"She walks away," the Cull said.

"What?" the Thundering Dawn Vampire seemed startled.

"She lives, for this is the City where nothing may die."

"Oh yes," he said, "she is not really alive..."

"She walks away," the Cull repeated.

"We would remove her from the City. Obviously her blood will not run here."

"She stands and walks away in my dream. She leaves us unmolested, and continues her journey."

"Well..." said the robed Vampire, "clearly that's a metaphorical allusion, it represents-"

"No," the Cull replied, "it is a literal event, although several meanings may be drawn from it."

"But," the robed Vampire argued, the careful shadings of his words vanishing under the weight of frustration, "it has entered forbidden places."

"I brought it to forbidden places."

"I has insulted us by its existence, by its presence, and by its words, it has sullied memory and dream and ..."

The Cull sighed loudly.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Very well," the robed Vampire said. He pointedly turned his face from us.

"I will walk for a distance," the Cull announced, rising with a single smooth motion. "It will follow in my presence."

It departed in easy steps, the little Arukh and I followed, sweat running down my spine as I stared at her swaying backside. Outside the hall I was surprised to notice that the edge of the sky was light with dawn.

After we'd gone a distance, she spoke.

"Among my own people," she said, "the true people, the true dreamers, I am considered unbearably gauche. My every breath is one of inappropriate directness, my every word too forward. Too preoccupied

with the mundane, too blunt in my speech. I suppose this is why I am a Cull, or perhaps being a Cull has shaped this quality in me."

"But here, in this city at the end of the world," she went on, "among these who claim to be Fair People and call us Traditionals, who pretend to dream, it is like speaking to children. One wonders why one even bothers to speak to them?"

"You speak to me," I said.

She glanced at me.

"A creature might know how to make sounds that resemble words," she said almost whimsically, "but does it say anything? If it does speak, does it hear its own words? Do you listen when you speak? What do you hear? And if you don't listen to your own words, are they worth hearing for anyone else?"

She paused.

"Do I speak to you?" she asked. "Or at you?"

I blushed and lowered my head. I could not follow her.

"You have been to the centre of the world?" she asked, changing topic abruptly. "That great place where all life begins, where the herds run and the sky and the land stretches out in all directions?"

I nodded. I vaguely remembered it from long ago, before they had marked and abandoned me.

"I knew it," she said. "It makes you different from this one."

She glanced at the little Arukh, who cringed submissively. I made a noise, soft and rumbling in my throat, and stepped between them.

It seemed to amuse the Cull.

Something came together in my mind, a shifting of pieces that seemed to make the beginnings of a picture.

"How many Arukh have you made?" I asked.

She chuckled and looked away.

"Four or five," she said, "perhaps six. Who counts Rughk?"

She paused. "I have a taste for Goblins. Perverse, I know, but there it is. A small thing really."

"Am I one of yours?"

She shrugged.

"I do not know, and in any case, the question is without meaning, except perhaps to Goblins."

Goblins counted mothers as everything, Vampires hardly counted them at all. Who counted Arukh important? What did Arukh count as important? I wondered.

Did it mean something to her? I didn't know.

"Arrah!" I snarled at her, turning my face away. "Cull!"

Maker of death, I thought. Well I lived, we lived, despite her and her kind.

"Some of us," she said, ignoring me, "never leave the centre of the world. We ride there forever, to horizons that stretch away endlessly. And yet, at the edges, there are other things, strange and wondrous things. Sometimes we ask each other, are there other dreamers?"

She looked at me.

"Do you think Rughk dream?"

I could tell she did not need an answer.

"You called me a Cull," she said, "and this is my title. But you misunderstand. We do not choose the dead."

She touched me on my forehead, my eyes snapped shut, and I cringed abruptly.

"We choose the living."

I opened my eyes.

She was gone.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I found myself walking towards the Mermaids' dock. I abruptly changed direction, and returned to my lodge.

As I stepped through the doorway, a dozen hostile eyes glared at me with suspicion, and then looked away. The meal drums were still beating. I grabbed a piece of rotting meat from another Arukh and slunk to a corner to gnaw on it, occasionally licking off a stray maggot and crushing it between my teeth.

Arukh drifted through, eating, drinking, gambling or fighting. I watched them. We never took our eyes off each other. We never trusted, never relented. We knew exactly what our fellows would do to us, if given the slightest opportunity. We would do it ourselves.

I thought about the Mermaids as I watched my people. I could not imagine a race more unlike us.

I thought about the mad Princeling with his bloody iron knife. Why did I hunger for his death?

Because: He was just like us.

I had seen it in his eyes.

It was madness to pursue him, I realized. He had too much power. Too many Men at his command. I recognized my desire for his blood as a kind of madness.

Madness is the fate of the Arukh.

Still, if I moved carefully, I might see my desires won. I considered my choices. The night people were of no use.

The war was still winding down though, that much was coming clear. Armed parties still roamed the streets and boulevards, and Dwarves still tore down neighbourhoods, built and abandoned checkpoints and fortifications.

But the heart was out of it. There were not clashes and skirmishes. No sudden flurries of blood and fighting.

The Prince still lived. But there were still the Dwarves. They owned the Horsemen, and the mad Prince had ravaged invisibly among their own people. Now, with the war apparently coming to an end, they wouldn't need the Horsemen so badly.

They would not hesitate to put an end to him.

In the darkness, I grinned running my tongue over heavy fangs.

A Dwarf was busily carving runes into a wooden gate. I knew him. I'd seen him many times before, carving Dwarvish symbols in the market places. I watched him work with stone and metal tools. Other Dwarves bustled back and forth, ignoring us, keeping a wary eye on me. A small band of Totem warriors watched us.

"Small carving," the Dwarf said suddenly, acknowledging my existence, without quite looking at me.

I grunted.

"In the mountains," he said, "we carve big. We carved shelters and handholds, ledges. These were the simple things. And we carved the shapes of spirits and stories into living rock. Great carvings to take a lifetime and to last a thousand years."

"Are you from the mountains?"

"No," he chuckled, "but I've been out there. I've seen birds as tall as twenty giants."

Real birds? I wondered. Or carved shapes etched into the sides of mountains?

"Here," he said, "practically all the carving is wood. Wood is much faster, but it hardly lasts, and it's small. Better to carve stone."

"Why do you carve wood?" I asked.

He stopped and looked at me. His gaze was questioning. Finally, he turned back to his carving, running fingers along gouged wood. As he traced the outlines of his work, I saw stylized birds and goats, representations of Dwarves and Giants.

He seemed to chew his lip, glancing from them to the tools laid out at his feet.

"Some of those mountain carvings..." he said carefully, "aren't very good."

I waited.

"I've never found a shape I'd want to give my life to," he said finally, "but when I do, I want to be worthy of it."

He picked up a small metal tool and began to pick at the work he'd done already.

"I've never known a Hagrik to care about carvings," he said. "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for some Totems," I told him.

He nodded.

"You've come to the right place."

"I want to speak with someone from White Bear Totem."

He grunted.

"And Cracking Birds, Snow Leopard," I continued. "And Blue Ice Foxes."

He glanced at me.

"What about?"

"Totem business."

He laughed.

"From Hagrik? What sort of Totem sends Hagrik on it's business. Not even Short Tailed Cat does that."

Short Tailed Cat was the totem that controlled Arukh lodges in the Downriver.

"Fish Hawks."

He stopped, turning to me.

"Fish Hawks aren't an acknowledged Totem," he said at last.

I shrugged and tried to look stupid.

"I carry an important message for the White Bear Totem."

"That doesn't even make any sense. The White Bears are ice traders, Fish Hawks are fishmongers..."

Ice traders?

"It is a very important message," I repeated stubbornly.

He chewed his lip. The young toughs were watching us with interest, listening.

"What's the message?"

"It's about the White Bear Daughter."

According to the story I'd heard, the last to hold the title of White Bear Daughter had been abducted from the temple seven months ago. They had found the body six months ago. Half of it, anyway. The White Bear Daughter, as far as I could tell, was the highest ranking among the Dwarves who'd been taken. There'd been a storm of outrage, thirty Kobolds had been hung, as many more had been blinded. I was certain though, that she'd been one of the bloody footsteps along the Prince's trail.

"The Fish Hawks know something about that?" he said slowly.

I nodded.

"And they've sent you with the message?" His disbelief was apparent.

"I have a message about the White Bear Daughter," I repeated.

He laid his tools down.

"What has this to do with me?"

I held up my hand, letting a glint of silver roll through my fingers, out of sight of the toughs.

His eyes held on the silver, and then glanced at the toughs.

"Come back tomorrow, early in the day. Maybe I'll find someone who'll pay attention to you."

I shrugged. He picked up a tool and went back to work on the gate. I left.

I was back the next day with the Little Arukh, waiting. The Carver appeared with the strangest Dwarf I'd ever seen. He was half Dwarf, half wood. His legs and one arm were made of wood. That is, the flesh part of his legs ended, one below the knee and one above, and he'd had wooden pegs fitted so he could walk about. One of his arms seemed to end just a little past the elbow and he'd fitted a long stick there for balance.

For a moment they jabbered in Mountain argot almost too thick to follow. They glanced at me. I tried to look blank, as if I didn't understand them.

"Hey Abomination," the half Dwarf said, "come over here."

We walked over.

"You have a message?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What is it?"

"It is about the White Bear Daughter."

"What about the White Bear Daughter?"

"She was killed."

"And..."

"It is an important message," I told them.

"Tell me," he insisted.

"Horsemen killed her."

The Dwarves glanced nervously at each other. They jabbered some more. I waited patiently. Finally they decided that the White Bear Mother should see me.

"You come with me," the half Dwarf said. He waved his arm-stick at the little Arukh. "That one stays behind."

She growled.

I'd have liked to have brought her with me, for safety if nothing else. But in the Dwarf City, one Arukh at my back wouldn't make a real difference. I grunted and she subsided.

"I'm Foreman," the half Dwarf said. He noticed me staring at his stick limbs.

"Ice riding," he said, "spring rushes. Pack shifted. I get along well enough though."

I had no idea what that meant.

"Arrah," I grunted, noncommittally.

"Just glad to be alive. I had my doubts there, at first, you know. And I have pains now, it's not getting easier. But living is worth it."

"Arrah," I grunted.

"As you say," he said.

He led me into the Dwarf City, moving easily on his sticks.

The area we passed through was composed of narrow winding streets, paved with small stones, and thin wooden buildings that seemed to pile one on top of the other in layers. The windows were staggered, no window ever sitting above another window, or a door. I saw one dwarf stick his buttocks out an upper floor and shit in the street.

Foreman half grinned.

"Mountain types," he said. "Some places have chutes that go all the way down to the basement. But those smell. In my part of the city, we use pots."

Wooden buildings gave way to constructions of stone and brick. Dour little buildings stood apart from each other, and cursing dwarves shoved great, wheeled machines back and forth.

"The Ice Wells," he said by way of meaningless explanation. "The coolest part of our city. Even in the summer."

The White Bear Mother's hair was thick with white and her skin was spotted with age. Although her hands trembled, her movements were certain as she entered the room with a small ceremonial fire in a little brazier.

"I bring the gift of fire," she announced.

She set it down between us. Two other Dwarves entered the room. Another old male came in bearing a pot. It was full by the way he carried it. Behind him a younger, but still middle-aged, male entered, carrying small earthen cups. They sat beside her.

"The gifts of sustenance and making are brought. The safe lodging is complete," she said.

I wondered if White Bear Mother and Daughter were titles, or did one truly descend from the other.

Two more Dwarves came in, the last bolting the door behind him. They carried bows and arrows and took up positions in the corners behind me.

"White Bear Totem sits," the old woman intoned, ignoring them, as broth was poured into cups. One was handed to her, another to me. "Worm Totem Sits. Snow Leopard Totem sits. Three Totems gather in judgement upon the truth."

Her words had a formal cadence. This was a ritual or ceremony. I shifted uneasily. Rituals could be fatal for the unwary. People in rituals cared about the ritual, not who or what was before them.

She stared briefly at me.

"You are Hagrik," she said, making it not quite a question.

I grunted.

"I'm told," she said, "that some Hagrik are fast enough to catch arrows out of the air."

She glanced towards the archers behind us.

"Some of them," she finished.

A warning.

She sipped from her cup, and then the males sipped from their own. Taking the cue, I picked up the cup before me and put it to my lips. It was warm in my fingers, unbearably bitter in my mouth.

She watched me, her eyes almost amused at my expression.

"State your business, abomination," she ordered.

The words stung.

"I bring you red greetings from the White Bear Daughter," I said.

They froze. They must knew why I was here. Had I made a misstep in their ritual? Was there an offense?

The older male grimaced and turned pale. The White Bear mother's expression did not change. She set down her cup.

"If you were seeking our attention, the fact that you are here should tell you that you have it," she told me calmly. "If you have come merely to exercise cruel jokes or tell mad stories... You could die for that."

"Kill it now," the younger male said. But the other two weren't listening to him. They were watching me.

"You have come here," the old woman said. "You promise us the creature that killed the White Bear Daughter. Yet here you are alone. Not even a head in a sack. You did more for the Selk."

I shivered. They knew about that? How much else did they know? And if they knew, why was I here?

"I have a name for you," I said. "A name that you will already know."

"I'm very curious," the old woman said dryly, "as to how we could already have such a name. And if we did, why you'd have to bring it to us. You seem to be saying you intend to sell us something we already own, that's arrogant even for an abomination. Or do you consider us fools to trifle with."

It was a mistake to come here. They did not care what I had to tell them, they knew it already. This was a trap, and I was stumbling into it, deeper and deeper.

I found myself sweating. I resisted the urge to rock from side to side, to duck my head. They'd know these things and put arrows through me.

Instead, I waited.

She watched me, giving away nothing.

Finally she spoke.

"You considered it was worth your life, worthless as that is, to come here

and tell your story. You probably won't leave here alive, and everything I've heard tells me you would have known that. Tell your story."

I cleared my throat.

"No more games."

She smiled.

"From what I hear, you like games," the smile vanished. "No more games. Speak."

I began to tell the story again, as I had told it to the Selk and then the Vampires.

This time, there were frequent interruptions. The older male seemed to want to clarify things, pursuing details endlessly. The younger one seemed to argue against me with his questions. I spoke carefully and with patience, replying to every question, returning to my tale, again and again.

The old woman did not speak at all. She merely listened, watching the questioners as much as she watched me.

It went back and forth, until finally I had told the whole story.

"Faron, Prince of Men, Prince of Horsemen, it was he that killed the Mermaid for his pleasure," I concluded. "Killed all the others for his pleasure. He will kill as he pleases until killed himself. He will not stop."

"Why not?" the old woman asked.

I hadn't expected this. I licked my lips.

"Because he has not stopped. Because each time, he has only diverted, but not stopped. Because it pleases him not to stop."

She leaned back. Was there the slightest nod of affirmation. I was not sure.

Let them consider that, I thought to myself.

There was a long period of silence as they contemplated my words.

"This is it then?" the younger male said angrily. "You don't know anything about the White Bear Daughter? You just have a bunch of stories about killings?"

"Many killings, but one killer."

"Kobolds did it," he insisted. "They paid for it. All you have is a story.

The White Bear Daughter has nothing to do with your stories."

"Always the same. The same each time. Many stab wounds," I said doggedly, "small knife, two edges. Eyes gouged, tongue cut... Many killings, but one killer."

The White Bear Mother was watching the exchange carefully.

The younger Dwarf glared at me.

"Do you hope to profit?" she asked me.

"The knowledge might be worth rewarding," I said carefully.

They'd trust a motive that they understood. Best to be the creature they thought.

He nodded in satisfaction.

"For money then," he said, "doesn't matter, truth or lies, so long as you can sell it for money."

"For money," the older male repeated.

The old woman said nothing, she just watched.

"Before the Horsemen came," she said finally, "only the Vampires ruled horses. It made them very powerful. Hard to deal with. Now with another race that rides and fights on horses, they are not so powerful.

"We can use the Horsemen to shift balances in our favour. The Horsemen are important to the Humans, but more so to the other kingdoms as well. Particularly our own. Do you understand this?"

I nodded.

"If we warred with the Horsemen it would be to the Vampires advantage," the young male said.

I shrugged. I had the feeling he was speaking to the others, trying to convince them through his address to me.

"Strange that this story comes from a Hagrik, half Vampire," he said. "There was a Hagrik, a particular Hagrik, that went among the High Vampires not so long ago, I have heard."

I cocked my head, staring at him.

Where had he gotten that?

"Now a Hagrik, a particular Hagrik, comes to us with a story to split us

from our allies and deliver us to our enemies. Perhaps the same Hagrik? Is that not strange?"

The old woman glanced at him, and then back to me. I felt frustration churning in my guts.

"You do not believe me."

He chuckled. It was a small sour sound.

"You would lie to us, if you could get away with it," the old woman said. "You would lie to us for money. You'd lie to us to serve your masters, whoever they might be."

I stiffened, sweat trickling down my back.

"But then, the Hagrik are a fickle breed," she said, "lies, truth, all the same to your kind. You'd speak truth as easily as lies. So I can't just say ... 'aha, it's an abomination, so of course it's a lie'"

"But we can," the younger male said.

"Hush," she snapped, not taking her eyes off me.

"Your life is worthless, but you wouldn't throw it away, not for money, not for masters. Something like this, a lie is your life, the price is wrong."

She thought it over.

"You went to see the Vampires," she said.

"Yes."

"This is the story you told."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted them to kill him."

"Will they?"

"No."

"They seek peace?"

"Yes."

She stroked the whiskers of her chin, her eyes boring into me. I wanted to look away, but did not dare.

"You serve the Vampires?"

"No."

"You serve the Selk?"

"No longer, I am discharged."

"Your story, you went to the Selk first?"

"Yes."

"You told them the same story."

"Yes."

"But they discharged you."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"My service was done."

"They did not want revenge?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't understand them."

I looked down then, breaking the gaze. I stared at my palms, hands opening and closing.

"I... I met the Mermaids. I spoke to the Selk. They are not like me. They are..."

I searched for the right word while she waited, "... better."

"Do you want money?" She asked.

"Yes."

"There is no money. We were never going to pay you, no matter what."

I looked down.

"Yes."

"You're clever, that's what I hear. Did you know you would not be paid, that there would be no money."

"Yes."

"But you came anyway."

"Yes."

"And you said you wanted money..."

"Yes."

"That was the lie," she said, "the lie you told to get what you wanted. The lie you told, so we would listen to your story."

"Yes."

"What do you really want?"

"I want..."

"Look at me," she snapped. "Look at my eyes and tell me what you really want."

I looked, swallowed, firmed myself.

"I want him dead."

"Why?"

My composure shook.

"Why?

I licked my lips. Why? Why was it so important to me?

"Because he won't stop," I said finally. "Because it needs to stop. Because he makes suffering and death, and I do not want him to."

I looked down at my hands.

"I believe you," the White Bear Mother said.

The younger Dwarf's eyes darted to the archer behind me. He gave the slightest nod. Then, with a single motion he pulled a knife from his tunic and slashed the throat of the male Dwarf sitting next to him.

I heard the snaps of arrows.

I leaped to one side, spinning, feeling the whistling of an arrow shaft through the air. Desperately, I tried to twist out of the way, the arrow caught on my leather plating, it's speed whipping it around my body.

"Murder!" The younger Dwarf yelled, stabbing at the other. The older Dwarf held his attacker close, struggling in shock as the knife went in again and again. "Murder most foul!"

One of the archers was falling with an arrow through his chest. The other archer was stringing another. I hurled myself at him.

"Murder!" The younger Dwarf yelled again.

The smell of blood was thick in the air. From the corner of my eye, I saw him struggling with the Dwarf whose throat he'd slashed.

I leaped for the archer, with speed borne of panic, grabbing him before he could draw his bow. Lifting him, I pushed him at the other archer, hissing.

Fear increased my strength, as the archer struggled to draw the arrow in his bow I took it and pushed it up under his jaw, feeling a second's resistance as the arrowhead pushed through bone. From the corner of my eye I saw the Snow Leopard Dwarf free himself from the dying Worm Dwarf's embrace. As the archer gurgled and died I screamed and leaped for the Snow Leopard.

"Murder!" he screamed, swinging at me. "Murder."

"Arrah," I snarled.

I stepped back as he swung, letting him come forward. I grabbed his knife hand and twisted hard. I felt bones break. I jerked on it, for a second, lifting him off his feet, and then slammed him into the ground. He tried to squirm as I jumped on him with both feet, and then slammed his body again and again with great swinging blows.

"Arrah, arrah," I grunted.

I knelt on his body, feeling the ribs loose in his torso. I picked up his head and slammed it down.

I was almost out of my head. I'd made a terrible mistake in coming here.

"Why do you kill your own people?" I hissed at him. "Why?"

He struggled for the knife, just out of his reach. I glanced at it. Bronze, two edged, not very big, a notch on one side. A poor double for the Prince's knife.

After all, I realized suddenly, an Arukh wouldn't have an Iron Knife. A mad Arukh comes, leaps upon Dwarves, archers shoot her down, but not before she can stab many times, with the kind of knife she's used to kill many times before...

And then the killer would be ended, and the Prince's secret safe, and the Dwarves would take no accounting from the Horsemen. And any who knew better would know it to be safer to accept the story that was told.

"Why do you try to hide the name of the one who kills your own people? You protect the Prince? You protect the Horsemen?"

Suddenly, I knew why.

The words of the little Gnome flashed through my mind. The Snow Leopard Totem had invested far too much in the Horsemen. They'd put

all their resources into the Horsemen, and the Horsemen had used it to take the Human Kingdom.

Now the Snow Leopard Totem needed the wealth and strength of the Human kingdom to pay their debts. They'd gone too far, too deep, had risked too much. They couldn't afford to let go, and the Horsemen knew it. Their money had made them slaves, not masters.

"Dog!" I snarled into the ear of the dying Dwarf. "Slave! Die knowing you are owned!"

I slammed his head into the wood again.

"You were sent to murder your own people here! A Dwarf was killed in the street of Joy, and Dwarves paid blood price! Do you think your Masters protect their dogs? They protect the Horse Men. You think you own the Horse Men? They own you."

The Dwarf was dying, I could hear his death rattle as blood spread out under him.

"You hear me?" I hissed into his ear. My fist thumped his chest. "The Horsemen own you, and they own your masters. You tell each other that the humans serve you? Liars. You are slaves pretending to be free. You have made yourselves slaves. How long do you think they will let you pretend?"

I heard pounding at the door.

I glanced up, frightened, and looked around desperately.

My eyes caught the old female Dwarf of the White Bear Totem. She stared at me calmly, blinking slowly, relaxed and almost smiling.

There was an arrow shaft sticking out of the left side of her chest.

"I think you're right," she said. Her voice had a bubbly sound, and as she spoke, blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

She coughed suddenly, gobs of blood spewing up. With a visible effort she controlled the spasm, and made herself breathe shallowly. It wouldn't help for very long, I found myself thinking, the lung would fill up with blood.

"Horses... Horses are bad luck," she whispered. "They should have known. They attach themselves to a great beast, try to make its strength their own. It just goes where it wants."

"Much of what the Snow Leopard Totem has done lately makes... sense, when you see it like that. They are being dragged along... hoping they can take control..."

More pounding at the door, hammering.

We both glanced toward it.

"It'll be another minute or two," she whispered. "They'll kill you when they find you."

"Arrah," I grunted, looking around nervously for a way out. The room had no windows, just a heavy scrollwork of holes in one wall that let light in. Could I cut or tear through it? And what then?

"What a strange world," she whispered.

I picked up the bow and arrow, discarded it. I kicked the dead Snow Leopard Dwarf hard a few more times, feeling satisfying crunches as the ribs broke apart.

"I was going to teach my granddaughter scroll work this afternoon," she said. "She's very good. Now I'm dying with a beast. How strange. Who would think?"

I grunted irritably at her. Why didn't she just die? It was like she was made of words not blood.

"How strange," she whispered. Another spasm overtook her, she did not cough, but blood heaved from her mouth. The spreading red stain from the arrow covered most of her front now.

"...strange, it was a kinsman that killed me, that betrayed us, and an abomination that showed faith and spoke true... that saw truth."

That was a thought. I came over to her, seized her shoulder.

My heart was pounding, my blood singing, I wanted to take her and fling her around like a rag doll, fear and rage roared within me. I controlled them with an effort.

"Tell them," I said, "tell them it wasn't me. Tell them what happened. Tell them to leave me alone."

"You're an odd one... I would have liked to talk to you perhaps. But who talks to beasts? Who would have thought an abomination had anything to say worth listening to."

She closed her eyes, and mumbled unintelligible words. I listened for a

second, they were words clearly formed, but not a speech I'd ever heard.

"Men," she said clearly, "understand war. But they don't understand death. That's a bad combination."

That made no sense. She was dying and her mind was going.

I shook her, wanting to scream, needing her to stay, for her mind to remain, but trying to keep my voice calm.

"Tell them," I said.

"Won't help." Her words were getting fainter and fainter. "They'll kill you first."

"I'll kill them," I said furiously. "Whoever comes in I'll kill. You tell them."

"By the time they're ready to listen to me, I'll be dead. And so will you."

"What good are you then?" I snapped irritably. I lifted my hand to strike her, but pulled it away. It was not her fault; it would do no good to hit her.

"Why do you take so long to die?" I spat peevishly instead.

I leaped to the door.

"Arrah Arrah Arrah!" I bellowed at it. I heard them cursing on the other side.

She whispered something.

I swung back to her.

"Ano Aro Avo," she whispered. Then more gutturals in that strange language.

I cocked my head.

"Death blessing... " she whispered, her voice almost lost in bubbles. Red foam filled her mouth. She coughed, trying to clear it, and only spouted more blood.

"Men don't understand death. But women always have. You're a sort of woman. I want blessing, help me and I'll save your life."

"How?"

"Ano Aro..." she coughed.

"Avo..." I finished.

"Clever animal," she almost smiled. "Say the word for each pause."

She seemed to gather her strength, and then uttered a short guttural sentence in unknown language.

"Ano," I replied.

Behind us, the door started to splinter. The sounds coming more clearly through it. I jumped and hissed at it.

Again, a guttural sentence, similar to the first, but different. She seemed to break off midway through and had to start again.

"Ah... Aro," I grunted. I danced on my feet, hopping from side to side, flying around the room, searching for a weapon or means of escape.

Another string of sounds.

"Avo," I said quickly, almost before she finished.

Something went out of her then. She seemed to relax suddenly, she coughed, blood gushing from her mouth. I thought she was dead. But then she raised her head to look at me.

"Remember this," she said, and uttered more words in the strange language. "Say it to the first woman you meet alone. She will protect you."

I stopped, dead cold.

"What?"

She spoke the sentence, mumbling through the blood in her mouth. I repeated it. It was gibberish, I'd never heard anything like it.

With palpable effort, she said the words again. "Repeat."

I tried to make the same sounds.

"Again..."

Useless. Useless. Useless. I turned and screamed at the door, roaring my fear and rage.

They were almost through. Another moment and they'd knock it down. A moment after that, they'd come rushing through at me, or fill me with arrows.

"Ar-" I was ready to scream.

I glanced back at the old Dwarf. Wheezing painfully, choking on her own blood, she lifted her hand, pointing at a small panel in one wall.

I leaped in the direction she pointed, kicking and pounding at the panel.

It was hollow, there was a space behind it. Mindlessly, I battered and pulled and pushed at it until a hidden latch snapped and I felt it open inwards. It was hinged from the top. The hole, a narrow shaft, beyond smelled of excrement. I had a last glimpse of the dying old woman. I dove through it feet first, scrambling madly. It led down. The narrow walls were slick, there was almost no room to move my arms, I half fell, half slid down, falling free.

Then angry shouts.

I hit the bottom, liquid excrement splashing straight up and drenching me. My feet slammed through the refuse to the stone bottom. Shock numbed my legs. As I grunted with pain, it filled my mouth, I gagged, half coughing, half vomiting, fearing the noise I was making.

Panic, like the panic when I was surrounded by water. I was going to drown in shit, I thought. I pushed my fear down. No, no, they had windows all up and down to stick their asses through and shit into the pit. I could climb up somehow.

But wait, I thought with sudden clarity, sooner or later, it would just fill up. They must empty it. There must be a door lower, around me. I bent my knees, trying to feel.

Something clattered down the shaft, knocking against the sides, I felt my shoulder pad jerk, and then a splash in front of me. An arrow: they were shooting arrows down the shaft, but there wasn't enough room, they couldn't aim, the arrows couldn't get speed, that's what had saved me.

The shaft wall was different here on this side. It felt different. I pushed but had no leverage. I sunk deeper. Up above another arrow clattered down and splashed into the excrement. I sank down, got my knee up, feet flat and pushed hard with my legs.

The wall of the shaft behind me let go, and suddenly, I was out in a darkened basement room.

I fled through the next room, ran through a door farthest from the direction of the Dwarves. It lead to a staircase. I turned and fled the other direction, scattering shit everywhere, stumbling out into daylight past startled Dwarves. The sight of me, drenched in shit, was so bizarre they could not react. From the building I heard outraged bellows.

Dwarves were staring at me.

"Arrah," I snarled and rushed, scattering them before me. Which way to go? Which way was out? Not to the gates, there'd be guards there. Which way then? The river. Dive for the river, wash this off me. Without the stench I had a chance to hide.

The ice traders brought ice down by the river. It had to be close by. I paused for a second, trying to pick its direction out. That way.

A group of armed Dwarves turned a corner. For a second, we froze, staring at each other. Then they charged. I fled into a building. They followed howling. Behind them, came the Dwarves from the other building.

I raced up the first flight of stairs, frightening a mother and child, then leaped from a window. I hit the ground rolling and was on my feet. A straggler Dwarf was right in front of me. I jerked the spear from his hand and straight-armed him as I ran past.

Where was the river? I couldn't see it, there were too many buildings in the way. People were screaming. I rushed forward, scurrying around one building after another. I scrambled down an alley only to find a dead end. I climbed through a window. It was a kitchen, a pot over a fire. Where was everyone? Had they fled? Or were they rushing to see the commotion?

I rushed to the pot, put my hand on its surface. Hot, but not boiling. The stew was still cold. I put my hand in and it was not scalded. I shoved both arms in up to the elbow, wiping myself. I plunged my head in, dragging fingers through my hair, taking a mouthful and spitting it. Then I pulled the stew pot from the fire, pouring it over myself.

I'd no weapons, they'd taken them. But the kitchen was full of knives. I grabbed a cleaver, testing the feel of it. There were a pair of long knives. I stuck them in my belt.

A door opened. A young Dwarf woman saw me, tried to shriek and turn to flee. I leaped upon her, knocking her to the floor. The kitchen was too big for one servant, there'd be others. How long.

Kill her, I thought. Cut her throat and then run before the others came and sounded an alarm. I looked into her eyes.

She was scared.

She was so scared, her fear was absolute, like my own. I felt bad suddenly, that I was going to kill her. That she'd die, like the dwarves up above, like the old woman. Was she still dying now, mumbling to herself. Would she approve? No.

Suddenly, as clearly as if she was right there in my ear, I heard her voice again. "Say the words to the first woman you meet alone."

I grabbed her, lifting her with me as I slammed the door shut.

Covering her mouth to quiet her, I said the words.

She went absolutely still. For a moment, the only sound was the sound of our panting.

I said the words again, this time more carefully.

Her eyes were shocked.

I took my hand from her mouth.

She spoke the strange language of the old woman at me.

"Help me," I told her in the plainest Dwarf I could manage and then repeated the phrase.

There was a hammering at the door. We both jumped. For a second, she looked nervously from it to me, and then seemed to make an instant decision.

"Here," she whispered, taking my hand. She led me to a wooden bin, just large enough to hold me. I got in as she pulled handfuls of coarse fir branches to cover it.

There was angry shouting at the door.

I heard her run to it, listened to the barking exchange of words. At length, the ones on the other side of the door seemed to go away. I waited, listening. I didn't hear the door open.

What magic had been in the old woman's words?

The fir branches were pulled away. The Dwarf was there, staring at me in something like awe. I climbed out of the bin, towering over her.

"Are they gone?"

"They're still searching. I told them you were here, but fled through

another passage. I told them I had locked myself in for fear, and would not open, not even for them. It won't be safe for a while. You must wait."

I cocked my head.

"How far to the river?"

"You have to go to the caveholm," she said.

What?

I cocked my head. That seemed to intimidate her. She stepped back warily.

"Wait. It's not safe," she repeated desperately. "You have to wait here and go to the caveholm."

Her nose almost twitched. She was smelling me.

Caveholm?

She was frightened of me. Badly frightened. And confused. But there was something else. She should have wanted to be rid of me. But she insisted on... Caveholm?

I tried to master my own fear and think.

I was too far inside the City to get out. Not with a half dozen bodies behind me. The only reason I was alive was because this girl had sheltered me.

"Caveholm," I repeated, trying to make myself sound certain. Sound like a statement, not a question.

With an effort I grunted and stepped back against the wall, crouching down.

"Wait," I said. "I will wait. For Caveholm."

That seemed to satisfy her.

"Yes," she said quickly, backing up. "Wait here."

She looked around, taking in the scene for the first time.

"What did you do?" she asked, aghast.

The stewpot was rolled into a corner, the fire half soaked and smoking, tables turned, wood shattered. I'd made a mess in my panic. She looked at me, not fearing, but wondering.

"You smell like shit," she said, sounding surprised, "and turnips... And stew."

I grinned, showing heavy fangs. It was all I could think to do.

"Arrah," I told her, by way of explanation, and shrugged.

Then she was out the door before I could move to stop her. I cursed myself for a moment, for allowing her to leave. What now? Wait here in uncertain safety, or go out and risk inevitable danger? Neither appealed to me.

I rocked back and forth on my heels, before finally settling down and crouching just inside the door. That way, at least, I'd see whoever came in before they saw me. My nose wrinkled.

But they'd smell me first.

When the door opened a few minutes later, it turned out to be just the girl. She carried an wooden bucket and a coarse woven cloak.

The bucket sloshed as she set it down.

"For you to wash the smell off," she said.

She hovered uncertainly, shifting from foot to foot. She looked like she wanted to say something but didn't quite know what.

"I told everyone that you had fouled the room, not to come in, not till I gathered help to clean. But you should hide," she said finally. "In case anyone comes. I'll come back as soon as I can."

I nodded. And then she was gone.

I drank some of the water. Then used the rest to wash, scraping my skin and my clothes with tree branches just like the old days. The kitchen food was inedible Dwarf stuff, mashed roots baked hard. I spat it out.

Waited.

The minutes dragged on and I found myself reviewing the fight again.

Two arrows launched. Looking back, I was sure of that. I'd moved at the sound of the first one, the second I'd barely dodged. Now that I thought of it, the first arrow couldn't have been for me.

One archer had shot the other.

The second had been loosing at me, his aim spoiled when the arrow had struck him.

Only one archer was a pawn of the Snow Leopards, I decided. He'd killed the other archer.

The Archer and the Snow Leopard Dwarf would have killed everyone else, me, the old man, the old woman, archer, mutilated the bodies, and told their tale. It made sense that way. Sort of.

Why didn't he shoot me first? No Arukh was fast enough to dodge an arrow in the back. Instead, he'd killed the other archer.

That didn't make sense.

Shoot me first, and then, in the confusion, shoot the other archer.

Suddenly, with a moment of crystal insight, as if it was happening again in front of me, I realized that it was the second archer aiming at me.

The first had killed him to save me. He'd caused the second archer's shot to go wild, glancing off hitting the old woman.

Even in that room, even in that moment, it had been the Dwarves scheming against each other, plots upon plots.

And then I'd killed the first archer.

The Snow Leopards had been willing to kill to protect their secret. The White Bears had been willing to kill to expose it.

I'd killed the one who saved my life.

I stood up and walked around the small room restlessly, my body swinging from side to side. I grunted softly.

It bothered me that I had killed he who saved me. That was a poor reward. I'd been scared, I hadn't known. I thought he was going to kill me.

But he'd saved my life, and I killed him for it. My excuses felt hollow.

I didn't like to think about it. I wanted to run, to walk away, to do something. But there was nothing to do but think about the dead archer.

"I am sorry I killed you, Dwarf," I whispered to the air.

There was a noise at the door.

I scrambled to my hiding place in the bin.

A middle-aged Dwarf female crept into the room, holding a lance at ready. She advanced on my bin until we could see each other plainly.

I said the magical words.

Like the other, she seemed to freeze. She cocked her head and said

something in the strange language. Then she retreated. I was alone with my dead archer again.

I remembered how he'd looked as I shoved the point of the arrow up under his jaw into his brain.

"Poor reward," I whispered.

But he was long past hearing me. I was alone with the memories of the dead.

I wondered about the girl. If found, I'd likely be killed. Would she be punished if they found she'd protected me? Perhaps even killed herself? What would happen to her? There was little more to do than wonder.

Too long a time passed.

Finally, the door opened.

"It's all right," the girl whispered. There were a half dozen other female Dwarves were with her. They looked nervous.

"We're here to take you to the caveholm," she said.

The other women were staring at me. Involuntarily, my head bobbed.

"Say something," she whispered. "You're scaring them."

I nodded carefully and spoke the magic words. It didn't seem to calm them, if anything, they grew more agitated.

They dragged in a large wicker box, with two carrying poles hanging off its sides. They began emptying it, pulling out cloths and brushes, scrapers and earthen jars. Several of them began to clean out the kitchen. Two dragged the pot across the floor, examining it as they wrestled it back into place. Another gathered the knives from the floor. She stopped in front of me and stared. I handed over the kitchen knives I'd taken.

"Get in," she said, "we'll carry you to the caveholm."

No one was more surprised than I when I got in the box without protest. I supposed I would find out what the caveholm was.

You have to trust sometimes.

I was hunched forward, my head between my knees, as the basket lurched back and forth for what seemed an infinitely long time. I had the

sense of being outdoors for a time, then entering another building. Then going down.

Finally, the basket opened. I looked out. The jagged points of a kra lance hovered over me. I stared down its length. A naked Dwarf female held it. She was young and muscular, the curly hair on her arms and legs, thick and black.

She backed off a step. As the lance withdrew, I stood, feeling my back creaking. I luxuriated in being able to move again.

I glanced left and right. More naked Dwarf females with lances. I noted that they didn't hold the lances expertly. The woman to my left held her lance braced against the crook of her arm, with her free arm crossing to steady it. Her first lance, probably not trained, I decided. I could kill her easily and take her lance.

Past them were a strange assortment of female Dwarves. All naked, all unarmed. The girl I'd first met was among them. I stared with interest, I'd never seen naked Dwarves before. Like the Selk, they ran to fat, their thick musculature hidden beneath their flesh. The hair of their arms and legs was much finer than the mens', and grew longer on the lower parts.

We were in a cave? No a strange room, lined with clay panels to give it the look of stone walls. The air was heavy with aromatic smokes and guttering orange flames.

Words in a strange tongue rolled at me. I jumped.

An old woman on a stone bench had spoken. I studied her. She was the oldest woman in the room, the muscle hung like loose ropes on her thick frame. Her hair, what she had of it, was almost snow white. On her legs it grew thick like down, bright against the sallow colour and rough texture of her skin. On her forehead a pair of thin horns grew and curved delicately.

I'd only ever heard of horned Dwarves, never seen one. Their kind were from far upriver, and they seldom ventured out of the high Kingdom. Curious, I glanced at her hands. Thick nails were visible on several of her fingers.

I noted several other horned females. One middle-aged woman with two

rows running up her temples. Another with spikes protruding from her cheeks.

Again, the strange words. This time the tone was angry and demanding.

I jumped again. One of the women, startled, shook her lance at me. The old woman darted an angry glance away from me. I followed her gaze to another naked Dwarf. Was it the woman I'd spoken to? I couldn't tell.

The old woman turned back to me.

I spoke the nonsense phrase. Her expression turned to shock. There was a little titter behind me.

"She has the accent, at least," someone said. I couldn't pick out the voice.

"Say it again," someone else prompted.

I repeated it. General laughter rang about me. In spite of myself, I couldn't help rocking from side to side, hunching down.

A new word snapped out. The laughter quieted.

The old dwarf woman stared at me.

"Speak slowly," she ordered finally, using harsh Dwarf accents on the trade speech.

I repeated the phrase again, carefully, trying to remember it exactly the way it had been taught to me.

"Again," she commanded.

I started. She stopped me, barking a similar word. I stopped and considered it. It was like the word the old Dwarf woman had used, but not quite. How much of that was accent, I wondered? They made their sounds differently than I was used to. I started over again, making the sound as she did.

Halfway in, she stopped me again. She barked another word.

I started over, beginning to say the phrase again. The room seemed to go still. I started to pronounce the word the way she'd said it. The tension in the air seemed to deepen. It was as if people were holding their breaths. Something was wrong. The stress in the word was different, it was hard at the start and soft at the end, its rhythm wasn't the same.

I huddled down in the box. Finally, I said it the way it had been taught to me, putting the stress near the end. I stared around defiantly.

An excited murmur went through the crowd.

The old Dwarf regarded me. Finally, she spoke again. A single gibberish word. I nodded. It wasn't quite what I'd been taught, but it was close. The rhythm was right.

I repeated the phrase again, this time pronouncing the words the way she'd said them.

She nodded slowly.

This time, she directed a stream of nonsense at me.

I stared.

She stopped and said something. The inflection rose at the end and she looked expectant. A question of some sort.

I repeated my phrase.

"That's all you know how to say?" she said abruptly, cutting me off. "Isn't that right?"

I grinned and shrugged, bobbing my head at her.

"What is it you want, Honoured Mistress?" I asked.

"You are no mystery beast," she said. "What are we to do with you?"

"Mystery beast?" I asked aloud.

"The story races through all the Totems of the abomination who came into our midst and caused murder most dire," she said, ignoring me. "Murder most strange."

"This abomination," she said, "put an arrow into a wise woman of the White Bear Totem, and cut the throat of a man of Owl Totem. She broke the bones of a Snow Leopard man, and killed two archers, again with their own arrows. All in one room. Passing strange that is. Stranger still, she vanishes from the room where she is trapped."

"And then, a shit monster! An honest to gods Shit monster comes lurching through the streets, howling like a demon, but harms no one!"

"Then this vanishing abomination, fresh from the blood of a dozen men and women, appears magically in a kitchen. Accosts, but does not harm, an honest girl, hardly greater than and helpless as a child, speaking words she has no right to, in the hill country accent of the murdered woman."

I glanced around.

"Perhaps," she offered, "you can tell us how this unbelieveable fuck up came to be?"

"I did not kill the old woman," I said, "or the Owl Totem man, or one of the archers."

"Only the rest?" she replied, "is that it? Deny three murders and hold two to your breast? Are you stupid?"

I was silent.

"What the hells?" she demanded.

I waited.

"I ask myself," she continued, "how did they die? And how did an abomination come by holy speech? You've shown that you have a tongue of sorts. Use it."

I hunkered.

"And then Mistress?" I asked. "What happens to me then?"

"We'll decide that, creature," she said. "You'll not bargain here and you'll not bargain with us. Say your words and we'll make our decisions. Say nothing and we'll finish with you now."

I growled low in my throat and rocked back and forth.

Four lances around me, but not expertly held. I could take the woman on my left, take her lance...

And what then?

Cut my way through a roomful of Dwarves? In the middle of their city? Even if they were naked and unarmed I didn't reckon my chances well.

I told them the story. I started with my first sight of the ruined body of the Mermaid. I related my journeys across the city, and the people that I'd spoken to.

They were quiet for the most part. Different parts of the story brought bits of whispered conversation here and there. I continued, ignoring the murmur.

Once, the old woman interrupted me.

"There is no Fish Hawk totem," she said. "There's no such thing. One lie there."

Another woman spoke up in the strange language. There was a brief

flurry of unintelligible argument. I waited.

The old woman did not look pleased.

She snapped something, listened to several replies.

"Not a lie then," she admitted finally.

Finally the old woman looked back to me and told me to go on.

I continued. I was very careful when I related the encounter with the White Bear Mother to try and speak the exact words the old woman had spoken, even the strange language she'd spoken.

Several times then, I was interrupted. Different variations of words were put to me and I was asked to choose. I shook my head. They argued amongst themselves in the strange tongue. At length, they seemed satisfied that there had been a proper, if unorthodox, death ritual.

At last the story was finished.

They paused.

The old horned woman looked left and right.

"This is a strange tale. Usually, strange tales become simple when you sort them out. You get stranger with the telling. I don't like that. I invite the eldest of us, Ryusha, to speak, to tell this creature here, in the mock speech, of mystery beasts."

Another woman parted from the crowd. She was vastly more ancient than even the horned woman. The layer of fat under their skins was gone from her, so that her skin sagged across stringy muscle and bone. She grinned exposing toothless gums. Glanced around with rheumy eyes. She was nothing but loose skin and swollen joints. Two other women helped her to the bench.

She sat, radiantly pleased to be the centre of attention.

She cleared her throat.

Behind her, the horned women began to whisper to each other, their voices hushed, their heads bent so close together their horns touched.

"This is the good story," she said, "the story of the way things were, and the way things will be again. This is the story that women gather to tell in the long night of the third world."

She coughed a little.

"In the beginning, there was only the first world. In this world, there were only women. This world knew peace and plenty and all things, from the fish in the sea, to the birds in the sky, and the beasts in the field all spoke the one tongue."

A ritual mutter grew up around me.

"A woman named Effa ate of poisoned berries. She became ill. Day upon day, the poison of the berries accumulated in her belly. Finally, after nine days did a woman give birth to the first man, Akut. Akut was the first thing to come into the world since the creation."

"Akut," chorused softly around me. A refrain was whispered in that strange language.

"Effa looked upon Akut. The other women came to look as well. What is this thing? They asked. It is so ugly, they told each other. How awful, they said. What should we do with it? They wondered. But there was no death in the world, so they knew not what to do.

"Akut was allowed to grow up. Was this a bad thing? Some say it was, for Akut brought the second world through his ignorance and ugliness. But who is to say that the killing of Akut would not have brought the second world anyway? Who is to say that had Akut been killed, that the second world might never have ended?"

The questions seemed to have a ritual rhetorical quality. Uttered and asked so often it had lost meaning. Again, there was a refrain in that unknown tongue.

"Akut was born without true speech. He could not speak with the beasts or birds or fish, or with the sky or earth. Akut was clever though, and a nonsense speech was made so he could converse with women."

"Akut knew no peace, however. One day, Akut was out among the stones, when he came upon Apnut the golden ram. Akut, in jealousy over the ram's beauty, hit it with a stone. The stone cleaved the ram into six portions. Two before and behind, two above and below, two on either side, thus are all things now measured. Thus did death come into the world, the second new thing since the creation. From this then did the shadow fall, the third thing, and the end come upon the first world.

"Akut hid the body of the golden ram, but there was no hiding what he

had done. The shadow deepened and turned to night, the first of nights, but there were no stars in this night, nor moon. Cold came upon the land.

"All the living things came together to debate over what happened, and what to do. Then was it seen that Apnut was nowhere to be found. All the living things did then call out Apnut's name and search in six corners of the world. But none was found. Finally, Akut returned, in his hands he held the thing that he had found. All gathered around to see this new thing. It was like stone, but without colour. It was ice."

This was wrong, I thought suddenly. This wasn't a Dwarf story. It was no Dwarf story I'd ever heard. In the Dwarf stories, the world was made from ice by the warring totem creatures. There was no world of women, there was no first world, no second world. I shook my head.

"The ice grew and grew. It covered the world. Everywhere in the second world it spread, and where the ice spread, nothing could live. What the ice touched, died. Many were the women who died."

Another strange refrain. I noticed the whispering women would pause to join in the refrain, and then an instant later, they'd be touching horns again.

"Akut confessed what he had done, but it was too late. The second world had begun. Many were the beasts of the earth that died."

The same refrain, the same words came again. I glanced around, my lips unconsciously mimicking the sounds.

"The night without end had come upon the world. Many were the birds of the sky that died."

The refrain. I assumed it meant 'many deaths.'

"The magic of life gave way to the magic of ice. Many were the fish of the waters that died."

The refrain. I was certain now. Death.

"With each death the ice spread further and it grew colder, until finally, all that lived in the world were trapped in a little cave. All the birds and fish and beasts and women and Akut. All the life left remaining in the world was in the cave. All the women danced, on and on, to save what was left from the ice.

"Finally, the women could dance no more. Then alone, did Akut dance,

to keep the ice at bay while the women rested.

"All that was left alive in the world came together in the cave to debate. There they resolved that they needed a new sun to dispel the ice.

"The women who yet lived made a plan. Each of the fish and birds and beasts and women gave up a piece of their life to make the new sun. Thus did all but the last of the true women lose the power of true speech. Thus were all their lives bounded to spans of days."

"Only women who made and bound the magic were able to retain true speech, and even their lives, though longer, were left bounded.

"The new sun was bound up in the golden hide of Apnut and then did Akut take it into the sky to set it where it might shine.

"But too much life had gone out of the world and the new sun faded and grew faint.

"Thus did the women come together, and in the true speech they determined to make a new magic to preserve the world and renew the sun. Thus did Akut wound each of them with the penis bone of Apnut, and thus did give up blood from their wounds to make the new magic.

"This new magic they bound in a cradle made from the white bones of Apnut and again did Akut carry it into the sky, where it became the moon. The cradle of bones did not hold all the magic: spilling from the moon, were the stars, which filled the balance of the sky.

"This is why women bleed with the changing of the moon, for it is their blood which holds the moon in course and renews the sun each morning."

The whispered conversation was finished. Now they waited heads bowed, speaking the refrains as they came, but otherwise silent and motionless.

"Thus was the third world made, a lesser world."

"The ice retreated, but it did not go away entirely. Instead it advances and retreats. Truly this is a lesser world that is unable to banish ice forever.

"Truly this is a lesser world where all things die in time.

The refrain again, but with some differences. I tried to wrap my tongue

around the new sentence. If my life had been saved by a line of their speech, it seemed wise to me, to capture other bits of it.

"Women and females of every kind had lost the magic to reproduce by themselves. Only by joining with the magic of males could they make more of their kinds.

"Truly this is a lesser world where only women are left the true speech.

The new refrain. I guessed that this had something to do with diminishment, with a smaller, lesser world.

"Should women ever forget the true speech, or the magic by which the sun and moon were made, then shall the ice spread again to cover all things forever."

These last statements had the intonation of ritual to them. Her speech was strange. It seemed to have a different rhythm than the normal speech of Dwarves. I thought that this story was probably told in the strange dialect that I'd heard.

"The women alone of all living things had retained the power of true speech, but of the other creatures, some fell farther than others. Of all the creatures in the world, those who fell furthest were your people, the Hagrik, who lost even the power to reproduce themselves and must use the mock speech of others."

I grunted irritably. It seemed that nobody could tell a story but that the point was that the Arukh were shit. I wondered what they would all do with their stories if we were not around.

She paused, seeming to stare at me, though I doubted her filmy eyes could make out my shape.

"This is how we have come to the world we know. But some say that a new world will come, like the first world again. Some say that as a sign of the new world there will come Mystery Beasts: Beasts or birds or fish to whom the true speech has returned."

She stopped expectantly.

I stared back at them. I was completely at a loss.

The old horned woman spoke.

"This creature is false. It speaks not the true speech. It knows only what it is told, it speaks without understanding."

Suddenly I understood the purpose of the story. It was to keep us occupied until she and her cronies had been able to decide my fate. I gathered myself.

There was a buzz of discussion at this.

The old horned woman held up a spadelike hand.

"But hear the words she said: Were they not spoken with the intonation of Meg Alam, the old mother? Were they not spoken with her accent? Could you not hear her the whistle in her speech?

"This creature is not a mystery beast, but a message. Through this ignorant creature, Meg Alam has named her murderers.

"Sisters," she concluded, "we must consider her wishes."

She addressed me.

"Our sister has asked us, speaking her words through your throat, that your life be preserved. We will honour this. You will be taken from this place and set free outside the Kingdom. Does this suit you?"

"Arrah," I said, feeling something approaching relief. "Yes, Honourable Sisters."

"You will be taken from the Kingdom in the manner that you were brought here. Does this suit you?"

I nodded. It didn't suit me. Trapped in a box they might throw me off a tall building. Or into deep water far from land. They could burn it. Pierce it with lances. I tried not to think about it.

One of the lance holders looked apologetic. "You'll have to get back into the box," she said. "We'll try to move you quickly."

"Don't latch it," I said.

"We won't."

They covered me and closed the lid. I cringed as they latched it anyway. As the box was carted I heard the rising sound of voices arguing in the strange language.

The box moved and shook. I couldn't make out much. I felt it being dragged up and over. Then outdoors. There were a series of irregular bumps and jolts that suggested I was being dragged on a sledge outdoors. My muscles began to cramp up.

The box stopped.

"All right," a voice outside said, "I've dragged you far enough. I reckon you can walk the rest of the way yourself."

The lid opened. I pulled away the hide covering me and struggled out. We were in a small clearing in wooded glade, the ground sloped steeply upwards. I could see why they'd tired of carrying me. There was a clear path, but I saw no sign of buildings.

"You thought we'd take you out the front door," a woman said. "Back of the Kingdom, down the goat trails. You can circle your way back to the city once you're far enough. Get you past the trees, to the edge of the bush."

The bright sun was in my face. I crouched away from it groaning. I walked a slow circle, stretching and cracking my joints. I took great heaving breaths of fresh air.

The Dwarf woman, dressed in soldier's leather and light armour sat on the box watching me. Another stood nervously, a few feet away, holding a Kra-lance. How had she carried that I wondered? It looked unwieldy.

I glared at the woman on the box.

"I brought a lunch," she said. "Pemmican."

I knew it: boiled meat, dried, ground to pieces and mixed with animal fat and crushed roots. Barely edible.

"And beer."

I stared at her.

"On top of the basket," she explained. "Gods knows, you're heavy enough. I didn't need the extra weight. But we didn't want you busting out inconveniently, before we'd decided. So we tied it down and thought to put some weight on it."

I was tired and frustrated and aching. I desperately wanted to grab something and beat it to a pulp.

"You may as well sit and eat. There's no way you can walk out of here without me. Sit and eat, then we'll go."

She smiled at me and held out a meat cake wrapped in succulent leaves. I grunted.

She shook the cake, offering it.

I grabbed it.

"Move," I said, and sat on the box next to her.

"You can go now," the first woman told her companion. The second hesitated for a second before trotting swiftly away.

We nibbled at the cakes in silence. The hateful sun beat down at me. I squinted and faced away from it, hunching forward.

"I'm glad of the way things went back there," she announced, as her companion turned a corner. "It could have been messy. Inner city women most of them. No contact with the lesser races. Half of them had never seen an Arukh before. They had no idea how dangerous your kind can be. Or how fast. Rylli wasn't even holding her panther lance proper."

"I noticed," I said dryly. Rylli must have been the nervous little female on my left. "Panther lance?"

"Proper name for it. Out in the city they call it a Kra Lance, because it's mainly used for your kind. Same use though; stick the animal hard and then keep it away on the other end of the lance while it dies. Panthers, they're nasty. They'll work their way right up the lance and tear you up before they die. Just like Hags. Cross bar keeps them from you."

I nodded.

"I was watching you. If you moved, I figured you'd go after Rylli as the weakest."

"What would you have done?"

She shrugged.

"Rylli's dead, no question. The others move in, I figure you take her lance, stick one of the others. I move back to defend the Elders. No one can fault me for that. Once you're committed, can't use the lance because it's stuck in someone, I come at you."

"Good plan," I said.

She nodded.

"Thanks," she said. "Just to see how the drifts blow, how would you have done it?"

I clicked my tongue thoughtfully.

"Go for the one who didn't know how to hold her lance," I said. "As you said. Kill her, take her lance. Look for the strongest fighter, kill that one

fast with the Lance. Go at the Elders, kill some and then hold the weakest hostage. See what happens…"

"Aah…"

There was a long uncomfortable silence as we chewed and reflected on all the possible ways the battle might have gone, pondering moves and countermoves, neither one of us much liking the outcomes.

"Just as well nothing happened," she said abruptly. "Rylli's a good youth, brave and clever. Shame to see her killed."

I nodded.

"You are warrior then?"

She laughed.

"I know which end of spear to hold if that's what you're asking, but I'm not a warrior."

"Only a fool goes into battle when there's any other choice. It's men's foolishness. But women should mind their cooking, lest it boil over, so I keep watch for the true people. Best not to let the men get too far out of hand."

"Ever been in a battle?" I asked.

"Once," she replied. "Too easy to get killed in something like that. Best to keep an eye on it from a safe vantage point."

I laughed.

I decided that I liked her alive.

I wanted to tell her that, but there seemed no easy way to express it. What could I say? That I would not kill her? I thought of the archer and how I'd killed him. That I would not kill her if I had the chance? That I would not kill her if I could avoid it? That I would not kill her and enjoy it? That I would kill her and feel bad?

There seemed no way to put it into words she would not take as a threat.

At least, I decided, she did not kill me when she had her chances. I followed that thought.

They'd brought the lance with them, after all, and tied the box.

"Easier," I said reflectively, "to try and kill me in the box."

She was silent for a moment.

"In my experience," she said finally, "and from what I have been told, killing an Arukh is no easy thing, and a clever Arukh is harder still. Not that the others would understand that."

She pursed her lip, trying to decide how best to form the words.

"What someone tells you to do, and what they might want you to do," she said, "that might be different than what you want to do, or the best thing to do. You see?"

I shrugged.

"Nanhama," she said.

I looked blank.

"The bitch with the horns," she explained, "Nanhama'tighak."

I nodded.

"She said to me in the true speech, 'Take this creature somewhere out of the sight of our eyes and kill it.'"

She was watching me levelly.

"Of course, if you really are a Mystery Beast, you know what she said... If you were a Mystery Beast, you'd hear that. What are you going to do, what choices? You'd get in the box, knowing what you know, and you'd be ready. An Arukh, damned hard to kill. Especially when they know it's coming."

I grunted softly, no trace of expression passed my face.

"And so?" I asked her.

"You go through life doing every single thing that Elders tell you," she said, "odds are, you won't get very old."

I laughed at that. Dwarves were a cantankerous lot. It seemed to relax her.

"So," I asked, "why?"

She thought about it.

"Bad magic to kill a Mystery Beast. Very, very bad magic. And," she shrugged, "even if you aren't a Mystery Beast... "

"If I'm not?"

She grunted.

"You held yourself well, back there. You could have made blood run,

women die, but you didn't. If you spoke true, you'd done nothing to merit killing. You'd even done old Nanhama a service. She wasn't fond of Meg Alam. The two were always going at it. Poor reward to put a stick through you just because you were... faithful and true."

"I thought and thought," she said, "finally I figured I couldn't make a decision on an empty stomach. Best to eat and talk about these things."

I grunted.

"Killing should never be done lightly," I said, "it generally amounts to a great deal of effort."

She nodded.

"Aye," she said, "and there's always consequences. Blood starts to flow, never know where it will go or how it will stop."

I frowned for a moment. I'd heard that before.

"What happens to you?" I asked suddenly. It occurred to me that there might well be repercussions from failing to murder me. She might fear the consequences more than the act itself. I should be wary.

She laughed.

"I didn't kill a Mystery Beast. I dare them to punish me for that."

She had decided to have me live. Or had she really? I wondered. Perhaps she was just selecting her time.

"It might be hard to explain a dead Arukh in a box," I said softly, thinking aloud. "The Dwarf men might wonder how an Arukh came to be in the box. Might wonder if this was the same Arukh that killed all those people in the tower. Might wonder if this was the shit monster all cleaned up, and how it got clean. They might wonder at how long the Arukh was missing and who it might have been talking to. Perhaps women might not want men asking these things."

"Perhaps," she frowned.

"Better then," I suggested, "for the Arukh to die out in the open. So you'd have to let it out of the box. Perhaps, it would be better to lead it somewhere. Somewhere it might be killed without arousing questions."

"That is a thought."

"Now if I were looking for a good place to kill an Arukh," I pointed. "It might be in a grove, like that place over there."

She looked, squinting.

"These are interesting notions that you have."

"I am Arukh."

She glanced at me, wary again, perhaps afraid.

"It seems to me," she said after thinking on the matter for a while, "that whoever led an Arukh into that sort of place might be in considerable danger from the Arukh."

"Arrah. The Arukh would most certainly kill them."

"And not just the Arukh. Arrows, knives flying around..." she continued, "bad place to be in the middle of. A woman might be liable to be killed right alongside the Arukh, no matter what happened."

"Seems certain," I offered.

"It stands to reason," she said carefully, "that someone wanted to get an Arukh killed and had to put a woman in that position, they might not tell the woman."

"That seems likely."

We sat quietly.

No storm of arrows fell from the sky. No screaming furies burst from the bushes.

"Just as well we aren't going that way," she said after a while.

I agreed.

"You should be an elder, thinking like you do, head all twisty like that," she said. "You'd get along right well with Nanhama."

"That story," I said, "about the death of the world. I've never heard a Dwarf tale like that."

She laughed.

"That's the true story, told among true people," she said, "Men's legends: steaming piles of shit. All that stuff about warring totems creating the world from ice. Makes no sense if you think about it for even a minute. It's complete superstition. It's such obvious nonsense. I don't know how they swallow it. The true stories are only told between women."

She coughed, abruptly changing topics.

"No one expected a Mystery Beast to be an ...Arukh. More likely a goat or a bear perhaps. A dog. But an Arukh. I'd have been less surprised to hear a cockroach speak."

"Thank you," I said.

"I mean no offence," she said, "it's just that an abomination..."

She fell silent.

"Protect this beast," she said.

"What?"

"That's what you said, 'protect this beast', in the broadest hill country accent I've ever heard, and with the whistle through missing teeth that Meg Alam had."

"Arrah," I said. But I was interested. I waited to hear more.

"I mean, you didn't say it very well, but you said it. No one could deny it."

She took a swig of beer and handed the bladder to me. It was still half full. I drank.

"Nanhama," she continued, "she and Meg Alam hated each other. She even tried to get you to say 'destroy the beast,' but you wouldn't say it. That impressed the sisters more than anything."

She paused and uttered words in that strange language.

"Preserve and destroy," she said thoughtfully. "They're almost the same word, no? But you wouldn't say it."

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"You spoke true speech, everyone thought you might be a Mystery Beast. A great coven was called."

"I've never heard a tongue like that before," I said.

"It's the language of women. The first language, once spoken by all living things."

"It's nothing like the Dwarf tongue."

"Men's tongue, you mean," she said, "an animal speech of mock words. We do not speak the true tongue in the presence of animals."

Which was why, I realized, the conversation in that room had shifted

back and forth between Dwarf speech and their own language. They couldn't decide whether I was an animal or not.

I glanced at her.

"No offence," she said.

"None taken."

"Pass the beer back. These things are salty."

"Arrah," I replied, passing back the skin.

"What happens now?" I asked.

She seemed to think about it.

"Now," she said, "they're going to argue. They're going to argue for years about this."

"Dwarves argue a lot," I said.

She shrugged.

"We're mountain folk, nothing to do up there but starve and argue. That's why we come here, where we can eat and argue."

She paused reflectively.

"They're going to be taking a long hard look at the Snow Leopard Totem," she said. "There'll be argument, but sooner or later every Snow Leopard man with his hands in the Horsemen is going to be dead."

"What about Snow Leopard women?"

"They'll argue against it, to preserve their men. Not supposed to. Not supposed to hold to Totems against other women, but it happens. They'll make peace with it."

"And the women who had their hand in it?"

"Women wouldn't do that," she said it with automatic certainty.

"What about the Prince?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"May as well curse the Mountains," she said.

She must have read the look on my face.

"Someone lets a bear into camp, it hurts people. Whose fault is that? The bear, doing what bears do? Or the man who lets it into the camp?"

"I'd kill that bear," I said softly.

"Men's work," she replied easily. "We have to keep them around for

something."

"You should kill the Prince," I urged.

She shook her head.

"Why kill the Snow Leopard men and let the Prince go free?"

"The humans, they're not really people, they're like a kind of animal. People don't kill people," she said, "or allow people to be killed. That is the law. The men must be held responsible. They'll pay. Maybe the Prince later, someday. But he's not important. We have to look to the important things."

"What are people? I asked, "and what are animals?"

She thought about that.

"Women are people," she said finally, and stopped. She glared at me defiantly.

And Dwarf men? I wondered. Were they people for being born from Dwarf women? And what of Kobolds, male and female, also born from women? Would they be people? I sensed there was more of a discussion here than she wanted to enter.

"I hear Vampires do birth rituals," she said interrupting my thoughts.

I shrugged.

"Do they do them for Arukh?"

"No."

"Who does rituals for your death?"

"There are none."

"No birth, no death." she said wonderingly. "The only proof that you ever existed is the fact that you're sitting before me."

I glanced uncertainly at her, remembering my strange conversation with the Vampires.

"As we count these things, you are less than a ghost."

I rumbled low in my throat.

"And yet, you spoke the death ritual for Meg Alam. Or that's what you told us. She told it to you, though I'll grant you said the words with that funny whistle through her teeth. How can it be that a non-creature spoke the death ritual? Perhaps you lied, learned the words, but did not give

her. They say Arukh are cruel, and that would be cruel. But that makes no sense: too many of the words you spoke were true, or sounded like true words imperfectly spoke. Meg Allam's death is accepted as consecrated. They all agreed on that. How can this be?

"If you are a Mystery Beast, then all is explained. Surely a Mystery Beast could pronounce the rituals as even a true person could."

She seemed to be arguing with herself.

She faced me.

"Are you?" she demanded. "Are you truly a mystery beast?"

"I am Arukh."

"Are you a mystery beast?"

"Nanhama said I wasn't." I was almost amused. I wanted to see where she was going.

"Aye," she replied, "some would say that was an error on her part. I think she had some choices and took the one that would trouble her least for the moment. Mark my words, it'll haunt her down the road, especially if you live.

"We'll argue about you, about what you said in there, for years.

"Yes," she said, thinking out loud, "Nanhama called you for a noncreature, but she acknowledged the rituals of death were properly done. Troubling indeed. Lots of questions come out of that, but no tasty answers."

She paused, following after her own thoughts.

"What do you think?" I asked.

She looked at me.

"I saw Meg Alam's body," she said.

"And?"

"There's no way she could have said all you claim. Not with an arrow in her like that. Her lungs were filled with blood."

"So."

"Something supernatural at work. I don't know. If you are a Mystery Beast, then fine, it all makes sense. If you aren't, then there was powerful magic at work in that room. Either way..."

Abruptly, she stopped.

"You saw the Mermaids," she said, harkening back to an earlier part of my tale.

"I did."

"Tell me of them?"

She listened rapt, as I talked about the Mermaids. I spoke of my impressions. Of the way they sang and the way I felt about them.

I found that the more I spoke, strangely, the more I had to say. She listened attentively.

"I've never seen them," she said. "But I've heard of them. Holy folk of the Selk, perhaps the holiest."

"They are..." I searched for a word, "...special."

She nodded.

"You know," she said reflectively, "out in the Mountains my old gran-"

I grunted quizzically, I hadn't heard that word before.

"The mother of my mother," she explained.

"Aah." What did that mean? I thought about it. It sounded a bit like the Goblins, High mothers and Low mothers. That must be it, I thought. The mother who'd birthed her.

"My Gran," she said, "she used to wonder if we were the only people to survive the Second World. She thought perhaps in other places unknown and lost, little pockets of true people might have endured under the ice for a time."

"I mean, how were we to know for sure? We were trapped in the cave, labouring to bring the Third World forth. It's possible, others might have survived to live in the new place."

She gave me a strange nervous little smile

"Heresy I know," she said, "but there you have it. Who's to say it's not true?

"So tell me," she asked, "when the Mermaids speak, does it sound like the true speech?"

I stared at her.

She stared back, her eyes questioning.

I thought about it.

"I have spoken of the Mermaids," I told her finally. "I would tell you what you want to hear. But truthfully, I do not know. I say this, there is a truth in their songs."

She nodded, considering this.

"Fair enough."

We sat quietly, for a while.

"You know," she said finally, "it's a big world."

"Arrah," I agreed.

"Larger perhaps than we dare to realize."

I grunted.

No one stopped me as I walked out of fringes beyond Dwarf City and made my way back to the Downriver.

I thought about the Mermaids.

Damn them, I decided. They had no right to live in a world like this. I had done what was asked. I had the gold the Selk had paid me, the gold I had taken from the street shaman, and the lesser coins I had taken from the prostitute and my victims. I had no cause to be dissatisfied.

And yet, the Prince lived and a Mermaid was dead, and somehow this offended me. The Prince lived and there were ruined bodies in marshes and alleys, and somehow this offended me.

I was exhausted by the time I finally made it back. Iron Pants seemed surprised to see me, but who knows with Trolls. He watched me as I stalked back to my hole and closed it in after me. It was strange, I was too tired to bluster and growl, but the other Arukh got out of my way anyway.

Later, the Little Arukh found me in the Lodge, eating.

"Speaking to Goblins," she told me, excitedly, her voice pitched over the sound of the feeding drums. I stared at her.

"Speaking," she repeated. "Speaking. Words and talking."

"I catch Goblin," she said, grinning. "Not kill. Lift to smash brains out. Goblins squeals. I stop. Say 'tell me.'"

Amazing.

"Goblin cry and wail. Say nonsense. Say 'spare me spare me'. Angry, not tell me good things. Lift to smash brains again. Stop. Say 'tell me of Brave Tohkzahli.' Say 'tell me of Vhoroktik.'"

Now she was interested in Vhoroktik? I felt a passing discomfort. Vhoroktik had shown no liking for me. I did not like her following me, but I liked the thought of her following an enemy less.

"Tell me," I said finally.

"Vhoroktik takes Khanstantin's name. Now Vhoroktik-Khanstantin. Chosen leader of Brave Tohkzahli."

Then her face fell.

"Mothers say Brave Tohkzahli fought against Mothers will. Mothers disband Brave Tohkzahli for disobeying."

"Mothers pay blood price for Tohkzahli deeds. The other kingdoms return the price. Mothers demand blood price for Tohkzahli."

Blood price was the compensation Kingdoms paid for the shedding of enemy blood.

I frowned. That didn't make sense. If the Tohkzahli had operated without the Mothers authority, then the Mothers had no claim on blood price. And if they were disbanded, how was it that a new leader had been chosen?

"Vampires pay blood price. Dwarves pay blood price. Only humans not pay, but then after, they pay."

All combatants paying blood price for the interloper? That was even stranger. Blood price was never paid quickly, but only after much argument and haggling. It didn't make sense that the warring Kingdoms would pay blood price, would return blood price, to a Kingdom which at best, renounced all involvement and at worst stood as a trespasser without right.

Perhaps there was more to the Brave Tohkzahli's actions than any suspected.

Perhaps, despite the words, the Tohkzahli had acted for the Mothers?

The Mothers were moving against the Horsemen?

No. They didn't want a war, that was why they'd disavowed the

Tohkzahli, I thought with mounting excitement.

But the Vampires had paid blood price anyway, because they wanted the Mothers as allies.

And the Dwarves and Horsemen had paid blood price as well... because they didn't want the Mothers to enter the war!

No, I concluded, the Mothers weren't moving against the Horsemen.

The Mothers were moving against the Prince.

A slow grin spread across my face, frightening the Little Arukh.

The Mothers.

I squatted at the Goblin Wall, staring patiently at the massive stonework. Around us was the Goblin city. Most of it was underground in complexes of burrows. The ground arched and rolled with elaborate tunnels, some of which heaved above ground. Sometimes as you walked along paths in the Goblin city you could feel things rumbling underground. Hills rolled which were not truly hills, some grass covered slopes, others steep and gleaming with daubed plaster. The little Arukh was with me.

The Goblins worked small, I thought. Their burrows were woven as much as built, wood frames latticed and bound together in triangles and circles, small stones added to the framework, and covered with layers of matting and plaster. Bark for waterproofing, leaves for insulation.

But not the wall, I thought. The wall was massive stonework fitted together. It looked more like Giants' work.

Giants had built the Goblin Wall for them? That was a startling thought.

Why build it in the middle of the Goblin City? Unless the Goblin City had outgrown it?

Or, unless, as was rumoured, there were treasures within...

A crowd had gathered about us, mostly diminutive males and Hobgoblins. Except for the wild girls, female Goblins seldom left the burrows. Mothers never.

A Handmaiden came forward.

"You are known to us, Child of the Ara," she stated.

That wasn't the formal greeting. I tried not to let surprise show.

"The other: She is not known to us."

"She is mine," I replied, feeling the words grate in my throat. I supposed I'd never get rid of her now. Not until I woke with her knife in my neck anyway.

The Handmaiden nodded.

"We have received your supplication. What do you desire from us?"

"I seek audience with the Mothers."

"This is forbidden," she said. "No Ara may lay eyes on a Mother."

But I had, a long time ago.

"I seek it nevertheless."

"What could the Mothers grant you?"

I grunted. "Justice, vengeance, the righting of wrongs."

I paused. "An army, an assassin, the death of a Prince."

A murmur ran through the crowd gathered about us. The Handmaiden stared hard.

"Remain," she said finally, "a higher one will come."

We waited. The sun climbed high in the sky, burning our skins. The crowd waxed and waned.

Another Handmaiden appeared. This one was tall, even for a female Goblin, who were generally taller than their males. She stood perhaps a little less than half my height. Her body was stolid and blocky, her belly was bare exposing long caesarian scars.

"I am by rite of birth, Highest of Handmaidens, servants to the Mothers. Your petition goes no further."

"I come," I said, "a daughter, demanding audience with the Mothers."

"The children of Ara are denied the Mothers' love," the Handmaiden replied.

"It is said that the Mothers' love encompasses all the things in the world."

She nodded. "All things, except the children of the Ara," she replied.

"And does the Mother love her other children?"

"The love of the Mother knows no bounds."

"Does the Mother love her daughters, the clever girls?"

"The Mother takes joy in the clever girls."

"And does the Mother love her Totzakl children?"

"All her children are dear to the Mothers heart..." she paused, "except for the children of Ara, who are merely pestilence upon the earth."

I grinned, showing sharp teeth.

"Then on behalf of the Totzakl and on behalf of the clever girls, I come to speak to the Mothers."

"They can speak for themselves."

"They cannot," I replied, "their voices are stilled."

"And why are they still?"

"They have been cruelly murdered, their lives ended, their voices stilled, their flesh defiled. I come to you with the scent of their blood in my nose and their death pains in my heart. They cry out for vengeance and I bring their cries for the Mothers' ears."

"A child of Ara?" she asked. "Speaking for Totzaklinh and Ahnklin? Why?"

"I..." I hesitated.

"The Totzaklinh care for their own," a bold Hobgoblin said.

"The Totzaklinh have fought," I said, "the Brave Tohkzahli have shed their blood for vengeance, and still the dead cry out in my ears."

"The Brave Tohkzahli are disbanded..." she said carefully, "for now."

For now? Which meant not at all. What were the Mothers doing?

"The Brave Tohkzahli did not heed the Mothers wisdom'," she said. "They are no more."

"For now," I said.

She smiled broadly and inclined her head to me.

She spoke loudly, not to me, but so all could hear. "Heed the fate of the Brave Tohkzahli, blinded to the Mothers' wisdom they fell from the Mothers' love. Consider their lesson before you let loveless creatures fill your ears with lies."

I went cold.

"You know," I said softly.

"The Mothers know all," she smiled serenely.

"You know," I insisted.

She shrugged.

"And Totzaklinh and Ankhlin lives, these mean nothing to the Mothers."

"The Mother loves all her children," she replied blandly. "But the Arukh."

"The Mothers do nothing, while blood flows," I accused. "As it was in the beginning, blood flows to pollute the world."

There was a stir in the crowd.

Suddenly, I felt tired and very cold. I should have expected nothing more. The sterile goblin females that he had cut to pieces were worthless to the Mothers.

"He will come," I said, "he will come, and he will dig the Mothers from the burrows, his hands will tear your roofs, and he will reach down and seize Mothers and babies and he will spit them on a stick."

A hiss rippled through those gathered. What I had spoken had come very close to obscenity. The Handmaiden looked outraged, her face contorted, as if she did not know whether to vomit or scream.

"And do you know why?" I asked.

"Begone, creature of lies," she commanded, screaming.

"Because he can," I snarled. "Because he can, and for him, that will be reason enough."

"The interview is ended," she yelled back at me. "You come to us thinking you know of blood and vengeance! Your knowledge is not the hundredth part of the Mothers'! Yet you would spill blood only for the simple thoughts in your head? You would replace the Mothers' wisdom with your base lusts?"

"Your audience is denied. Your requests are rejected. Your heart's desire comes to nothing."

She stood abruptly and began to walk away. A squad of Hobgoblin guards stepped in behind her to bar us from the path they called the Mothers' Passage.

"You mock me," I snarled at her back. "But I know this. There are lives

cut short. There are children, people, your people murdered…"

She never turned.

I sat waiting. Moments drew on. The crowd grew restless around us.

"The High Maiden will not return," a Hobgoblin warrior said, not ungently.

I felt a sense of terrible wrongness. It should not end like this. I thought I'd understood, but it didn't make sense.

"Go away, Arukh," the warrior said softly, almost kindly, "your kind are not wanted here."

I sighed.

"We won't kill you if you leave, we owe you that. But if you stay, no choice at all."

Time to go. I climbed to my feet.

The crowd dispersed.

On the edges of the Goblin domains a little Goblin waited for us, sitting on a pole.

"Greetings great Sister," she said. "Mothers' love upon you. If you want it."

I stared, not just at another atypical greeting.

A Wild Girl.

"I know you," I said softly.

"You had my life in your hands once," she replied. "You let it go then. I hope your mood has not changed."

I nodded.

"How is it that you knew where to wait for us?" I asked.

"There are Wild Girls stationed at every gate we thought likely," she replied. "We knew you'd come. You're not very bright, not really. But you are stubborn."

Stranger still. Why would they have needed to do that? Why couldn't they have just followed me?

"The Mothers have denied your petition?"

Didn't she know? Another mystery. I knew too little of the Wild Girls, I decided.

"How is it that you know of my petition and not its answer?"

"A monster petitions Vampires and Dwarves? Goblins next? You were expected."

"The petition is denied."

"Aah," she said. "We thought so."

We?

"Foolish creature." She asked, "you think all the Mothers have to do is wish it and the Humans will melt away?"

I blushed hotly, for I supposed that on some level, I had believed it. I had seen Mothers dead, and yet, on some level, I still believed they made and marked the world.

"The Mothers have done what they deem sufficient to protect their children, to show the Horsemen their power, they will do no more."

They deem sufficient?

"What do the Wild Girls deem sufficient?"

She smiled apologetically.

"The disputes of Handmaidens and Wild Girls, this is not a conversation to share with obscene beasts."

I stared, trying to fathom shapes in these murky glimpses of the Goblins' world. I'd believed everything came back to the Mothers. But the Wild Girls seemed to be a sort of power of their own. A lesser power, but a power nevertheless. I remembered my earlier encounter with her.

"Are the Brave Tohkzahli truly disbanded?" I asked.

"So the Handmaidens have decreed."

Handmaidens decreed? Interesting choice. I tucked it away to think about it later.

"And what do the Wild Girls decree?"

She laughed, exposing neat little goblin teeth, refusing any answer.

"Arrah," I said. "What now?"

"We wait," she said simply.

"And he kills?"

"Let him kill elsewhere."

I had nothing left to say. Whatever the politics of Goblins, it hadn't

extended to killing the Prince or protecting their own people's lives. The Little Arukh and I walked away in silence.

My heart was heavy. I scuffed the ground as I walked. Of all the peoples, I thought, the Mothers should have revered life, should have said this thing should not be.

But in the end, they were just like all the others.

"Followed," the Little Arukh grunted softly.

I nodded.

She slowed, drifted away from me.

A Hobgoblin followed, a hungry wary presence like a dog following after scraps.

We moved along, wary. Distance opening up between us, but not so far we lost awareness of each other. He followed, clumsy and obvious. There were no others. She slowed, falling back, until she was behind him.

Finally, I turned a corner onto on a narrow street. I picked a sheltered spot and waited.

He stumbled forth, blinking, rushing so as not to lose me. Hobgoblin, but young. Younger than I'd thought. Not armed. Not trained. A fool.

I stepped out, confronting him.

Behind him, on the other side, the Little Arukh stepped out as well. Mirroring my actions, not attacking. Good. At least she wasn't completely murderous.

He stared from one to the other, his eyes wide.

"Arrah?" I grunted.

"I'm Tefikhatha... Tef..." he paused, as if waiting for us to give our names.

"We are Arukh," I said simply.

It dredged a memory up from him. He nodded.

"I'm..." he struggled, "Vakhavlanka was my sister."

We stared mutely.

Sister? Sister... from the same mother?

"She was killed. One of the ones killed..."

Ah. I thought, the body in the alley, the one I'd seen when the Brave

Tohkzahli had trapped me.

"What's a sister?" the Little Arukh asked curiously. I glanced at her.

Had she ever asked such an odd question before? I couldn't recall such an event. And why this question? Why now? What was in her head? I had no idea.

He stared at us then, finally realizing the vast gap between the Totzaklinh and their progeny, the Arukh.

"Uh... we had the same mother and father, born from the same womb..."

The Little Arukh cocked her head, as if considering. I shrugged.

"I heard you speak," he said. "I listened..."

Tears were running down his face, his voice hitched.

We stared.

"Thank you," he said. "Her life mattered. We know... We all know... Thank you... for caring."

We stared.

He turned and fled.

The Little Arukh and I turned to stare at each other.

Finally, I shrugged wearily.

I was tired of the strangenesses of other races. Let them have it all, the Arukh were not the only people who knew madness.

We returned to Iron Pants' Lodge, tired and dispirited. There was no resistance, no challenge to our entry. The feeding drums still beat.

As we passed through the gateway, I headed towards the massive cooking pots. At the fires, Iron Pants looked up, staring at me, staring past me. At the same moment, the Little Arukh squealed.

I bolted. The next instant the head of a massive lance struck sparks from the spot where I'd been.

I whirled, hissing and drawing my knives.

At the other end of the lance, holding it, was a huge Troll covered from head to foot in gleaming bronze armour. He stepped forward, barring the doorway.

"The half races," the armoured Troll rumbled conversationally, "have

generally been a great disappointment to us. I admit, some of us were curious, even intrigued. Drawn to the half races as trivial, eccentric side projects. Diversions."

He advanced relentlessly, using his lance to cut me off from escape, driving me back towards a corner.

Iron Pants and the other Trolls had left their places and were coming forward. For an instant, I imagined they might be coming to rescue me. That hope evaporated almost as soon as it was born. Trolls do not contend against each other for Arukh.

"We hoped for something new. Something interesting. Something perhaps greater than its origins. Alas, the Hobgoblins are only mischievous Goblins, grown large, but still clinging to the Mothers teats."

Strike. I danced back as the lance scarred stones at my feet. Trolls circled about, hemming me in. Far behind them, Arukh gathered, watching.

"The Kobolds are lesser images of the Dwarves, reproducing in themselves, everything they hate. Ogres are mere cripples. The Dead Men, but sad imitations of their parents, cleaving to both, amounting to neither. Disappointments, hollow, imitations, each of them"

Strike. Sparks flew.

"And the Arukh…"

I feinted a dash to the left and when he moved, dove right, narrowly escaping the clutches of the Young Troll. The head of his lance again struck sparks against stones. Iron? He grinned, massive yellow fangs glistening through the bars of the helmet.

"Very good, you are clever and quick. It will not save you, but you are good. I continue: The Arukh…" he concluded, "The Arukh are simply monsters."

Strike.

"Abominations."

Strike. I skipped away. Angered, the lance struck again and again.

"Abortions."

"Barren."

"Mindless."

"Worthless."

"Vile."

He paused, panting.

"But somewhat agile."

The lance darted again and again, driving me back.

"Monsters need to be destroyed."

"There are Arukh all about," I said retreating and cringing, "why me and not them? I'm not special. I'm just a simple beast. I've done you no harm."

Glowering faces watched us.

"Why not," he said reasonably. "One does what one can. Your death will be a small thing, but it will improve the world. Should I be dissatisfied?"

"Coward," I snarled.

Begging would do no good. I spat, as much at an obstinate and hateful world as at him.

He shrugged eloquently.

"Be respectful," he barked. "This is an unpleasant and degrading task and best finished quickly. It has fallen to me to kill you. You should show appreciation, or at least courtesy, to those who assist you in your passing."

He advanced.

"How is it that the Horsemen are your masters?" I asked.

He stopped.

I cocked my head.

"Is it gold?" I asked. "I have gold to pay you. Kill them instead and its yours."

The Arukh laughed around us. There had been a day when an Arukh had gambled with the high gnomes, had somehow won, and then scattered their gold like water. They never tired of that story, no matter how many times they got it wrong.

I glared at Iron Pants.

"Tell me," I growled. "Tell me what my crime is? Tell me who I've

murdered or how I've offended the mighty Trolls? Show me your reason? The 'reason' you clever Trolls prize so."

Iron Pants stopped and raised his hand.

The others waited.

"You have murdered the Horsemen's Shaman," he began, "assaulted their General, conspired to murder their Prince, stolen their horses, accused the Prince to friends, enemies and strangers alike, of heinous deeds. You sent the Brave Tohkzahli into battle against them, slaughter their allies in their own homes, shouted obscenities at handmaidens, defiled the sacred places of the Vampires and stir up war on every hand. You think perhaps they might, someone might, somehow possibly have taken offence?"

"What is it to the Trolls?" I asked. "Surely, you do not cringe and lick the feet of dogs as well as Humans."

Far back there, was a raucous crowing laugh. They did not turn around.

There was an ear splitting yowl. The little Arukh advanced with hesitant steps, holding her ridiculously long bronze sword out, making little mewling noises.

The armoured Troll looked over his shoulder, and then turned to face her. Trying to take advantage of the distraction, I moved, but found Iron Pants blocking my way. He was not distracted.

"You raise a weapon," the armoured Troll rumbled dangerously, "to me?"

"Begone," he roared and turned away.

The little Arukh retreated several steps. Then, whimpering with terror began creeping back.

A rumbling began to grow among the Arukh through the Lodge.

The armoured Troll turned to her again and took a menacing stance.

"Not another step," he warned, dangerously.

She keened continuously with fear, her eyes wide, her whole body shaking like a leaf. Yet still she held her ground.

Other Arukh, shadowy menacing figures shambled forward, to stand or lurk a few feet behind her.

The Troll glanced past her, and then stared at her.

He hesitated, nervousness showing through. Then he stiffened.

"If you take one more step," he snarled, "I will take you and break all your bones, then I will set you up high for the sun to burn you and your tongue to swell from your mouth with thirst and for birds to pluck out your eyes, and then I will set you down in a dark wet hole for rats and maggots to gnaw upon your flesh even as you smell it rotting in your nostrils."

The little Arukh keened in terror, but she did not back away.

"I will do all these things so that the Arukh may know that death is the smallest and least of the terrors and torments awaiting those who challenge Kakihish."

He cocked his head, staring at her.

"Go away," he snapped.

She held her ground, whimpering.

He stared at her, and stared beyond her, as if measuring the consequences of advancing on her.

"Not one more step. Not another step at all," he said finally.

The rumblings behind her grew louder.

The armoured Troll seemed to glance at the surrounding Arukh and muttered something guttural that I did not catch.

Iron Pants sighed.

"Do you know the story of how the Giants' Kingdom came to be?" he asked me, speaking loudly for all to hear.

I shook my head.

"What does it matter?"

"The first Kingdoms were of the Dwarves and Goblins, then came the Vampires."

"What of the Selk?" I cocked my head.

He looked at me, both irritated with my interruption and curious as to its source.

"The trade speech is mostly Selk, they must have been first," I explained.

The younger Troll stifled laughter.

The others glared at him. Then they glanced at each other, and for a second, I had the strangest feeling that I'd managed to surprise them, and perhaps somehow frighten them a little.

"She's very clever," one of them whispered.

"Cleverness is not a quality often seen or well used in the Arukh," the armoured Troll said. "Docility would serve better, taming would suit them."

"And if they can't be tamed?" the younger Troll asked.

"Kill them all, cleanse the world of them again for once and all," the armoured Troll spat.

He snarled at the watching Lodge.

He was frightened, I realized. He'd come in here expecting a quick kill without incident. He hadn't expected them to gather at his back. It unnerved him.

My mind raced, looking for a way to turn it to his advantage.

"The Kingdoms grew rich," Iron Pants interrupted, returning to his story, his voice emphatic and forceful, "trading with each other, there was peace and plenty.

"Then Giants began to appear. Like animals, they wandered about, digging in the garbage, attacking where they saw advantage, retreating where confronted by arms.

"The Giants did trouble the Kingdoms much as did rats and locusts. There seemed to be no end to them, and no solution to the problems they created.

"Finally, the Kingdoms banded together and sent a delegation to the Giants, and they said: 'You shall form a Kingdom of your own, that we can trade and parley with, and all the Giants shall be of the Kingdom, and shall be bound by the laws between the Kingdoms. You shall select those to be responsible, so that we know who to grieve against."

"Thus was the Giants' Kingdom made, and the Giants themselves made peaceable. The Giants were made to be civilised.

"Thus shall we take the Horsemen and make them civilised," he concluded. "The Horsemen can be made to live in the city with others, to be bound to codes among others, as among themselves."

I had a sudden feeling that he wasn't just talking about the Horsemen, but about the Arukh as well. That his story was a silent plea to the others for my life? Or perhaps a warning to the rest of the Lodge? Or both?

"But not," the armoured Troll announced, equally forcefully, "if some pissant little Arukh persists in trying to stir up the waters with blood."

His posture was strange, as if he was trying to watch both myself and the multitude gathered behind him. He'd made a mistake, I realized. He'd just gone to the animal's lair, expecting to kill it and be gone. He hadn't expected it to be drawn out, or to be troubled by the other animals.

"Do you understand?" Iron Pants said softly. "The Giants were tamed. The Horsemen must be tamed. There are greater things at work, we are doing greater things, and the mad obsessions of a petty little monster cannot be allowed to interfere."

I cocked my head, absorbing this. My eyes widened.

"You," I said, "it was you that sent the Brave Tohkzahli into the battle."

"What?" he asked, hesitating. I'd shocked him.

"Not you, but the Trolls. It was the Trolls that had the Handmaidens send the Brave Tohkzahli. The Mothers did not know, that was a Troll scheme."

"The Mothers knew," the armoured one said defiantly.

"Did the Handmaids tell you that?"

Iron Pants winced.

The Trolls glanced at each other. I was frightening them again, being too clever. They wanted us to be clever, but not too clever. I could not stop.

"I thought they went for the Prince," I blurted, "but truth?"

Iron Pants rumbled in Troll speech, "the Horsemen had to be shown that they were not invincible. Their arrogance had to be wounded. This must have been plain to the Trolls... and to the Mothers."

Khanstantin had defied orders to go after the Prince, I realized. That was why Khanstantin and his little band had separated from the main body of the Tohkzahli. So that the rest would not be punished for his deed.

Khanstantin had died for the sake of a... demonstration? I was appalled. The waste. I remembered what he was in life. I remembered how Vhoroktik had been at his death. Strange emotions coursed me.

I spat at them. My body trembled.

"Bastards," I barked in Troll, "burrowers, scavengers, eaters of offal."

The armoured Troll glanced incredulously at Iron Pants.

"She speaks our tongue?" he said aloud.

Iron Pants and the younger troll exchanged worried looks. All those times they'd spoken to each other in their tongue, in my presence...

"Damn you for teaching it," He snapped at Iron Pants. "You coddle them. You explain ourselves to this... thing! It's vile."

"You cannot tame them," I said in guttural Troll. "They know no taming. Only life and death, only their own and all else is other. Your schemes are nothing to them. They are not tamed, only balked. They will wait and come again."

The Arukh looked at each other, not following the words.

"Horsemen?" the younger Troll asked. "Or Arukh?"

"Then there's little hope," Iron Pants said, almost sadly. In that moment, I knew he was talking about me. I hissed at him, hissed at all of them.

"I like this," the armoured Troll said sarcastically. "Thank you for your advice. I prize your wisdom so much, I think I shall carry your head about for a time."

He drove hard with his lance towards me. The Lodge roared as I leaped, dodging the blow. The head of the lance struck sparks from the stone floor of the lodge.

"Arrah!" I bellowed, answering the roar of the Lodge.

Then I was flying through the air, landing heavily on my side. Something had hit me. Iron Pants. I felt like ants were crawling all over my body as my knife fell from nerveless fingers.

I tried to get up. But Iron Pants grabbed my leg. I kicked, but it was like kicking stone. The younger Troll closed in, getting in front of the armoured Troll and his killing lance.

Iron Pants swung, and I was flying through the air again. For a second, I tried to scramble and grab his hand. Then everything exploded in light and pain as I struck the wall.

And Iron Pants swung again, my body flailing. The armoured Troll cursing the younger for being in his way.

In gasping moments, I kicked and clawed futilely.

And Iron Pants swung again, my body smashing into the floor.

And again...

As everything went dark, I heard the Arukh roaring in the lodge and the little one keening, and cutting through it all, Iron Pants voice booming.

"I pronounce..." he began.

I thought I heard the Armoured Troll roaring angrily.

"You've robbed me!" he bellowed. "The Kill was mine!"

The voice of Iron Pants. I could no longer make out words.

Darkness.

I woke. Everything hurt. For a few minutes, I laid there, trying to breathe normally, trying to listen for the Trolls. The ground was damp and uneven beneath me, the air cool. I reckoned that I was outside. After a few seconds, I dared to squint.

Arukh squatted before me. I let my eye roam. More Arukh. I opened them fully, feeling abrupt pain with the movement. I was in a circle of squatting Arukh. The little Arukh knelt beside me, her great bronze Troll sword out and ready. There was a Troll standing just beyond us. The young one. He nodded at me.

"You should be dead," he said.

I grunted.

Nothing seemed to be badly broken. I moved carefully, climbing to my feet.

"It was not by your will that you are not. It was not by the will of Kakihish that you are not."

I stared at him, rubbing dried blood out of my eye.

"Your will?" I asked. "Iron Pants?"

Had they bargained for my life.

Why? I wondered. What game were the Trolls playing with each other?

Not with each other. With us. With me. With the Horsemen. My stomach filled with bile as I saw the Trolls for what they really were. My

fists clenched, and in that moment, had I the power, I'd have slaughtered every single one of them.

"Carrion creature," I barked in the Troll's tongue. I switched back to trade speech.

"You are like the Prince. You play with lives."

A shadow crossed his face.

"Not like the Prince," he replied in Troll. "We play with lives. He plays with death. Only Arukh do not understand the difference there."

"The Prince..."

"The Prince is inconsequential, as are you."

"You will not be saved a second time," he said switching to the trade speech.

He switched to formal Troll, uttering a litany.

"I tell you this: The Interdict of Trolls has been pronounced upon you and the word is being spread. Every Troll who hears it shall be bound by the Interdict. The Trolls together shall bind all other peoples. Every creature that hears it shall be bound by our Interdict or shall be reckoned our enemy and marked for our vengeance. I tell you now so that you will be bound most of all."

"I have been hunted by Trolls," I snarled. "And yet..."

"The Lodge is forbidden you. The City will be forbidden you. All things shall be forbidden you. Even the air you draw breath from shall be forbidden you. We have pronounced your destruction."

"You are nothing to us and your power is nothing to us. There is no power that will defend you, and even if there were, we would destroy that power as if it were nothing. We pronounce the destruction of everyone who gives you aid, we pronounce the destruction of anything that tolerates you.

"We poison the water that you drink and taint the meat that you eat, we burn the ground upon which you step. Any Troll... any being, that knows you, must kill you."

He paused, considering. It struck me that he was not speaking freely, but rendering a speech that had been given to him.

"You have at most a few days before it is complete among Trolls. A few

days after that before it extends through the City. You should go away. Flee while you may. Go as far from the City as you can, and hide yourself from the sight of anything that walks on two legs."

He stood then, and with that long loping gait of Trolls, strode back into the lodge.

He stopped.

"Gratitude would be too much to expect from an Arukh," he said in Troll. "Pity."

I watched him vanish through the doorway.

The Arukh stared at me. They hadn't understood the speech. A careful move on the young Troll's part to pronounce in a language the witnesses would not understand.

My death had been ordained, and the best Iron Pants could do for me was to delay it.

How much power did the Horsemen have if they could bend the society of Trolls? I didn't want to reckon it, cold chills went up my spine at the thought.

I could see the difference the Troll had drawn between their games and the Prince's. I just could not love them for it.

They were making a mistake, if they thought they could tame the Horsemen. Eventually, they'd die for that mistake. I took no satisfaction from that thought.

I thought about running for the rest of my life. Running from everyone and everything. Fighting for every minute, buying my days at the price of others lives. Suddenly, I was weary, immensely weary.

And the Prince would go on killing.

"No," I said aloud.

No, he wouldn't go on killing if I could stop him. My life for his. That was a fair bargain. Fairer than any other I'd find.

"What did he say?" the little Arukh hissed quietly, just in case the Trolls might hear.

"Nothing good," I replied.

The doorway of the Lodge lay before us, dark and inviting, if not my refuge, at least a safer more secure place than the street, now forbidden.

There were fires everywhere. The dock was burning with a thick black oily smoke that rose billowing into the sky, the flames, dull orange, leaped and danced.

Other places, buildings I'd passed and wondered at, burned. The fires crept down their tethers, smoldering blackly, peels of white smoke rising.

Here and there people ministered to their dead or wounded. Others rushed back and forth. Some wandered about in shock.

Near the dock, I came to the Captain. Zizga. He'd boasted that the city bowed to the Selk.

He held the Selk girl in his arms. Fhala? No. Vhalala. She wouldn't care what I called her now, there was a great empty hole in the centre of her chest. It was empty. She'd stopped bleeding a while back. He whispered in her ear, put his hand against her brow, against unseeing eyes.

He looked up at me, his cheeks shining. His eyes were empty.

"Hagrik," he said. He knew what the word meant, but he could put no force in it. If there was anger in him, it was not for me.

"No fish for you today," he told me, "I'm sorry. No fish at all."

"Arrah," I whispered.

Past him I saw the fish wagons smashed. One of the oxen remained. Butchered.

Near the wreck of one of the wagons, the female Vampire laid against a broken wheel. Her eyes were closed, and her left arm was cased in a bloody bandage. The sand beside her was stained.

The Dwarf was hovering over her. Trying to wash away the blood with a broken crock half full of riverwater. He glanced at me.

"Carrion crow," he said, "come to loot."

"No."

"I served them poorly," he said. "I warned them of Hagrik. I was wrong. The danger lay elsewhere. The Horsemen came. We tried to fight them."

"They aren't your people."

"Everywhere," he said, "they're driven out or die. Once they were on

every river and stream, now they are only in little places here and there. Only here did they prosper."

"You know what they call the city?" he asked. He didn't wait for me. "They called it 'the safe place.'"

"There is no safe place," I said.

"Would that there was," he replied. "Would that there was."

"Yes," I agreed.

The Vampire moaned softly, he forgot about me, returning to her with the tenderness of a lover. Which, I realized now, was what they were.

I watched him minister to the Vampire. Her hand fluttered, and he folded it in his own.

"She isn't your people. They aren't your people," I told him. "Neither of you. What did you care? Why did you fight?"

"You wouldn't understand about people," he said. "The Hagrik have no people."

The Vampire moaned. He touched her solicitously.

"This is true," I said. But he wasn't listening any more.

The Captain was still whispering to the corpse. I turned and knelt beside him.

"No fish," he whispered to me, "no fish, no fish."

"She's dead," I said softly. I wasn't sure he knew. Perhaps the Selk knew nothing of death. Perhaps all they knew were stately processions of funeral boats, drifting ceremoniously out to sea.

"She's my daughter," he said.

Vhalala who fished with her father and made love on beaches, who pulled up scuttler pots and laughed and swam and ate, was dead.

"Arrah," I said softly.

"Arrah," he said. "You say that. What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything," I replied.

I stopped and thought.

"I met a mighty Shaman once. His name was Forty Friends. He told me something," I said haltingly.

I wet my lips and continued.

"He said the Arukh only had one word. It was their word for rage and for pain, for fighting and dying. It was a word spoken in sorrow and anger. It was the word they said to a world that didn't want them, that had no place for them. It was loneliness and defiance and in the end it was sorrow and surrender. 'Arrah' he told me, it was all the words the Arukh needed."

He nodded.

"Arrah," he said. "It is a good word."

"Arrah," I replied.

"Arrah," he shouted to the sky, tears running down his face, he held the body close to him. "Arrah! Arrah! Arrah!"

"Arrah," I said.

Eventually, the Ublul came to get me.

It was the big one. Slal. He was cut badly around the arms and head and shoulders. He could barely see out from under bandages oozing blood.

He stumbled as he walked. He was very weak.

"We couldn't stop them," he said gasping, as we paused to allow him to gather his strength. "They came on horses. I tried to hold a horse, but it was too big. It moved and I couldn't stop it. He swung and swung and I had to let go."

"The Dwarves have lances," I told him. "For Arukh. For Vampires. They use lances to fight horse riders."

"We will have lances," Slal said fiercely. "Next time."

There was something harsh in his voice. He straightened and lead me forward.

"They came riding, and they killed and killed and burned. And then they rode away," he said.

"All of them," he concluded.

All of them. The words rang painfully as confession. The famed Ublul had failed. They hadn't stopped a single Horseman.

He took me to a boat where Selk waited.

"The Elders wait," he told me. "They will not come on to land."

Nervously, I eyed the boat. I didn't think that they were planning to drown me. It seemed... inappropriate. I got in.

I sat alone in the boat with the Ublul as the Selk swam it out to the great offshore lodges. Docking, we climbed atop a lodge, walking up and across an immense made thing.

It was thick with Selk, old, young, male, female. They milled about. I realized that many of these had fled the shore.

I looked across the water. Fires burned, smoke rose in billows of black and white. Small shapes walked back and forth. Were funeral boats being loaded now, packed with corpses for the journey to the sea?

The Elders awaited me.

"Honourable Sirs," I said, lapsing into Dwarf honorific. They looked confused.

The Speaker for Elders stepped forward.

"You have acted with honour," he said formally. "We thank you."

I nodded carefully, not bobbing my head.

"There has been a conversation," he said diplomatically. He glanced at the fires.

For a moment, nothing was said. We stood there, thinking of the conversation he'd mentioned but had not explained. It hardly needed explanation.

"We thank you for your services," he concluded after a silence.

They started to turn away.

"What?" I asked, confused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The lead Elder stopped and turned back to me, the rest continued to walk away.

"We require nothing further from you," he explained.

"What about the Prince?" I asked. "He still lives."

"Yes, he does. It is not your concern."

"What about what happened here?"

"It does not concern you. We do not blame you."

I remembered with sudden shame my first meeting with the elders, and

my casual offhanded denial of the Mermaid's murder. They still accused me of nothing.

I no longer felt blameless.

"That's it then," I asked. "What about the gold?"

"You have earned it."

I snarled, half in shame, half anger.

"Cowards."

He stared at me.

"They will come back," I said. "They will not stop."

I'd seen that in the Tavern. The Horsemen didn't stop. They would just keep on coming until the enemy was destroyed.

He nodded.

"It will not be the same, next time," he promised.

"Then why?"

"Terrible times are coming, we see this. You are free to save your life as best you can," he told me.

I started to speak, and then stopped. He turned and began to walk away. After a few paces, he stopped.

"Save yourself," he said, "if you can."

"We set you free from obligation," another said, "do you understand that? We will not bind you if doing so is your destruction. You are free to run."

"You..." I wrestled with the thought, "you're trying to help me?"

Anyone else, it would have been hypocrisy, deception. But these were the Selk. I saw it. They's summoned me and I had served them, I'd refused to let go and they saw me dragging myself down, clinging to my obligation, drowning with it. And they were trying to cut me free.

"No," I said. "It's not for you, I hunt the Prince. This is not an obligation to you, you cannot release me from it."

But then, I wondered, what was it for? Why wouldn't I let go?

The eldest turned to me. "So be it. If you wish then, come back to us. We shall give you such shelter as we have."

"The Interdict," I said.

"We know the interdict," the Speaker told me. "We offer our safety. Such as we have."

"But..." I started.

What then? I thought. They would defy the Trolls. But, against the Interdict of Trolls, against the Horsemen, what could they do but die in piles as my enemies came for me? Madness.

I thought of Zizga and his fishermen hung up on spikes, of the stonecutter I'd met, of Slal and the Ublul, Speaker and the Elders, all ground down beneath Trolls or Horsemen.

No. I would not come back to them. I would never see the Mermaids again.

"There is no safe place," I said.

"We do not know if we can save our people," he agreed.

All I could give them was time.

I could not stand here.

He stopped and bowed at me, his smile humourless.

"So we have learned."

Selk milled about me, but I was apart. They were not my people. I had no people. Only the Ublul remained to take me back.

"Arrah," I whispered softly.

Deep within me something ached that I could not put a name to.

"I have questions for your King," I told the Horseman.

"You know where you can shove your que-"

Furiously angry, I hissed and twisted his head around.

There was a moment of stillness, as if every voice, even the wind had silenced. My fury vanished as quickly as it had come. I stared at the man I'd just killed, feeling somehow troubled. Something had gone from the world. He had lived in every moment I'd known. Now his trail was ended. I would know, that wherever I was or whatever I did, he would not be in those instants. He would not be somewhere else, doing something else in those moments.

It was a troubling thought. I shook my head irritably and cuffed him.

The head lolled, rolling with my blow. Dead eyes stared off sightlessly.

I found myself wishing I had not killed him. I was not sure why.

"Foolish man," I sighed. I was so tired. "You did not need to die. You might have held your tongue and lived."

No answer.

Irritated, I hit the body again.

The Little Arukh waited patiently behind me.

I looked around. There was another manling staring at me. Younger, this one was unbearded.

I walked over to him.

"They will be back," he said trying to shift his weight away from me. His left leg was bent in funny ways. "Keep away from me or you'll suffer for it."

I inspected him, squatting by his leg. He slashed at me with his knife. I took it away and inspected it.

"Bronze," I said. "Who has Iron knives?"

"I know you," he said, eyes widening. "You are the unholy beast that hunts the Prince for his iron. Why is a knife so important to you?"

"You are not clever," I told him, examining his leg. It was broken in many places, almost crushed. It would never heal properly. "Horse fall, you fall with it? Very foolish."

I looked at the small Arukh.

"Remember this," I said to the manling. "Ride a beast for its power and speed. But only fools ride great beasts as they fall, for in falling they crush what they bear."

He grunted as I pushed the leg, moving it back and forth, feeling the bones rub against each other. I could tell he was biting back screams. Good.

"You are not a good rider. You will not ride again." I paused. "You will not walk again, even if you keep that leg."

"Go to hell," he snarled.

I snarled back and pulled hard on the leg. He screamed.

"Not clever at all," I told him conversationally. "I do not hunt the Prince

for his iron knife. I hunt the Prince because he deserves to die."

"Uh uh," he gasped, "who says?"

I grabbed hold hard on his leg and twisted it, feeling loose bones barely held together snap and break.

"Don't play with me, Man!" I snarled fiercely. "I can hurt you."

"He killed the Mermaid," I told him angrily as he screamed. "He killed the Mermaid."

"Hurh huh," he sucked air, gasping for breath. "If you're going to kill me, do it now, eater of shit."

I reached out to twist his neck as I had before, but stopped myself. The sudden emptiness of the other man was still fresh in my mind. I would not make him dead as I had the other.

There was bravery there in his eyes. And fear. I stared. What past did he have? Who would mourn him? To kill him was the work of a heartbeat. But it was not necessary, and if I did, something would be gone from the world.

Behind us, the other, the dead man was conspicuous in his silence.

"Is that your wish, manling? To be killed?" I asked softly. What future would he have? Hardly much, crippled as he was, but then I thought of the Arukh cripple.

"Are you going to do it?" Very cautious. Somewhere deep down, he did not want to die.

I shrugged.

"Your choice," I said. "I have questions for your King. I want someone to take them to him."

"What are your questions?" he said. There, he'd made his choice.

He didn't want to show weakness by begging for his life, nor to throw it away foolishly either. He bit back something more defiant. He'd seen what happened to the other man.

"What hand do you fight with?" I asked him.

"What?" he asked confused. His right hand twitched.

Not clever, this manling. Not clever at all.

Right hand, left leg. I took his hand.

"You are not clever," I told him. "I want you to remember. You remember good?"

I snapped his little finger.

I waited for him to finish screaming. I watched his pain indifferently.

"The first question is: Who will catch fish for you? You understand that."

I waited for him to nod, and then made him repeat it.

"Good," I said, and snapped the next finger.

When he finished screaming, I said. "Ask him: Who will drive beasts for him?"

Again, I made him repeat it, and when I was satisfied, broke another finger. He yelped, but held much of it in. His face, shining with sweat, was contorted with pain.

"Who will sing for you?"

Snap. A yelp, and then a series of sobbing gasps. He repeated it on his own.

"What good is a kingdom that is only a mound of skulls?"

All of this, the little Arukh watched uncomprehending.

When it was done, I picked up the man by his good limbs, and slung him across my back. I carried him across the city. Three times we stopped to rest. Once, he asked for water. I gave it to him.

Some people, who did not love Humans, tried to come near as I walked. I just smiled at them, and they went away.

I dropped him near the Human places.

"Scream now, Man, and they will come. I will be away. But you remember my questions."

I turned away, and then turned back. He cowered away from me.

"Tell the Prince..." I said, holding his terrified face in my arms, "tell him...."

I thought for a second. "Tell him that I know what he does. Tell him I know what he is."

I nodded his face for him, and then took off. Behind me, I could hear the manling screaming.

"Why have you done this?" the female asked.

Why had I done it? I wondered. It was stupid and pointless. What did the Human King care about fish and beast and songs?

Then I thought about the fisher Captain, and the Vampire who'd been wounded trying to help them. Maybe these questions mattered to them.

I shrugged. Arukh are not good at thinking. I am told this over and over.

"No fish today," I told her softly. "Arrah."

We walked along in silence.

"What you said?" she asked sadly. "It was like the way Vampires speak..."

I looked at her.

"It meant something else, it was for someone else..." she stammered, "when you spoke of a great falling beast, crushing its rider. You didn't say it to the Horseman..."

She met my eyes.

"You said it to me. You were talking about yourself."

"Arrah," I said softly.

"They will kill you," she said.

"We all die. Everything dies. Everything but the Arukh. Arukh are born dead," I replied. "It is not to be celebrated."

I should run, I thought, I'd run out of allies and run out of prospects. Reduced to pointless foolish gestures I had almost nothing left to try.

I should run, I thought, knowing I wouldn't.

As we walked, she fell further and further behind. Just as she had when we'd trapped the Hobgoblin together. But when I finally turned around, she was gone.

Almost nothing left.

I had a dream.

I was standing in a smoke-filled lodge with Many Faces. She danced before me.

"First you go to Forty Friends to beg your act of murder, and now you come to me?" she asked. "You insult me. Again."

"There is blood on your hands," she said. "So much blood."

My fingers curled.

"You have insulted me," she said, "for the second time. Why do you offend me further with your presence?"

But the face she presented on her shoulder was sardonic amusement. She turned and moved, presenting a variety of expressions carved or painted into the shapes of her body. Contempt. Irritation. Curiosity.

Compassion.

Hips swaying, she moved close, putting a hand on my shoulder. I started, barring my teeth.

"Would you hurt me, beast?" she asked. "With your bloody hands."

"I killed Copper Thoughts," I told her, and instantly regretted saying it. I wasn't here to threaten her.

She laughed, faces presenting amusement.

"Copper Thoughts is nothing. A shaman's name is like mist in the morning, with the passing of the shaman, so goes his name. You'd do better to claim another death."

"The Prince?" I begged.

Her hand on my shoulder was light, yet somehow, she was rocking me back and forth. I stiffened.

Her touch vanished. She stepped too close to me, putting a curious shoulder forward. I backed a step, turning to the side.

"Kill him yourself."

"I cannot."

She stepped forward again; I backed turning.

"Then what do you want of me?"

She withdrew. Involuntarily, I stepped forward.

"Kill him for me. Or give me the magic to kill him."

"What will you give me?" Her voice was soft, almost musical. It made me sleepy. Her lips were suddenly close to mine.

"Anything," I whispered.

She laughed, throwing her arms above her head, her hips swayed as the

expressions of her body changed. It was as if all the faces of her laughed at me.

"The Troll's interdict has been called upon you, the warring Kingdoms have turned away from your voice, and even the Secret Kingdom has driven you off to howl like a dog in the night. You have gone to everyone but your own people. Why have you not taken your quest to the Arukh?"

I started to speak, but then my voice caught. Without gold? Without strength? I had nothing to offer the Arukh. To what purpose? The Arukh were a people without power. We were less than dust to the Kingdoms.

She inclined a shoulder. The face seemed to smile at me. As if it, as if all her faces knew my secrets. I had nothing left to offer. I was here as a beggar.

"Tell me your name," she demanded. "Your secret name, your true name. Surrender that to me, I will consider your request."

My breath caught in my throat.

"There is no name," I whispered.

She turned her back to me, head dipping, breaking a pattern I'd barely known was forming. The faces on her shoulder blades rose in mute contempt.

"Is it true," she asked, "that the Arukh have no names among themselves?"

I nodded.

"It is not good to be known," I told her. "To be known, to be named, is power to our enemies."

"And what of your friends."

I shrugged.

"None," she whispered. "So alone, each one of you, that to be known to any can only be ill. How sad."

"The world is many, the world is vast," I said. "We are small and alone. We cannot fight them all."

"What of Zerika the Fierce? What of Vhoroktik Hobgoblin Queen? Big Biter? Morbius Troll Cutter? What of them? For are these not Arukh with names?"

I grunted.

"These ones Mistress, they do not fear names," I told her. "These, Mistress, are feared above all things. They have names, not so as to be known, but to be avoided..."

She regarded me gravely, and struck a fierce pose.

"The earth trembles at the touch of Zerika's feet..." she declaimed, mockingly.

I nodded.

Approach. Pose.

"And death blooms beneath the gaze of Morbius..." A momentary pose of ferocity incarnate.

I nodded.

Approach. Pose. Her hand rested on my hip.

"I have heard of one," she said. "One the Arukh whisper about, they tell stories to each other about this one. One Arukh beyond all others, one who trails secret names behind her as the tails of a comet. One whose names are legion. One who answers to nothing, but is named again and again."

She moved forward, her hip rolling. I moved backward with her, my hips moving, guided by her touch.

I swallowed.

"There is no such one," I said finally.

We stopped.

"There are stories, told by a people without stories. They tell of this one. What of these tales..."

She pulled me forward. Our shoulders dipped together, we turned together, my body floating weightless.

"There are stories," I said. "But there is no one to bear their weight. There are names, but there is no one to wear the names."

Pause. Pose. Advance, sweeping me with her, her movements somehow commanding and reflecting my own.

"There was no one who gambled with the High Gnomes? No ferocious woman who saved the Kobold children? Who started the war, and ended

it by raising up the Secret Kingdom? No beast ever walked with high and low? No monster ever cast the bones of war and peace? There's no one who fascinated the Trolls? There's no one that dreamers see when they whisper Orc Nation in their slumber."

I shook my head, my cheeks burning. I tried to turn away, but only wheeled under her touch.

"There was never such a one as walked in the stories as they are told," I whimpered.

Everywhere I looked, her faces waited, mocking, observing, questioning. I could see nothing but her. She had become the world.

Pause.

She stepped back, letting utter stillness envelope us.

"And no Arukh," she asked softly, "there was never such an Arukh who loved the Mermaids?"

I swallowed, rocking back and forth grunting.

She laughed softly.

Then she swept forward, and suddenly I was whirling. My body swaying to her gay touches.

"You've not even a name to give me," she said. "Poor beast. What can you offer me? Bits of mud and pebbles? Cold ashes stolen from some abandoned hearth? Scavenged bones fallen from the tables of your betters? What could you possibly give me that I could want?"

"Anything," I said, "name what you want, I will give it to you."

"You'll give me whatever I want," she mocked.

Name a price and I will pay it. Name a thing and I will bring it to you. Name a deed and I'll give my life to it."

"What if I wanted a song, such as the Mermaid's sing? Could you make such a thing, could you sing it to me? Is that in you to give me?"

"What?" I asked. I was trying to find strength, mass within myself. I felt as insubstantial as air, a shape of dust hanging in the stillness, to be dissipated by a breeze or ray of light.

"No? What's left then? A bone, a bit of mud, a scrap of leather, a burned out ember..."

Laughter.

Whirl.

"Arrah," bubbled burning out of my throat. I stepped back, breaking her rhythm, away from her touch, hunching in on my self, black anger welling up.

"Easy beast," she soothed. "Easy, easy."

I relaxed.

"What makes the Arukh?" she wondered aloud, her voice soft and still. "What are you?"

Her hand slid around my cheek, collecting tears that I did not realize had flowed.

"What small shrivelled creatures you are," she said. "Tiny helpless things holding on to your bits of pale and fading light. Burning your way through the shadows of your lives, stumbling headlong to the shadow that must cover all.

"A race so forlorn and barren that almost nothing is held, not light or love, not family or friendship. Do you know a mother's love? Or a lover's kiss? I think not. Your existence mired in such poverty, you cannot even bear names among yourselves. Among the lot of you, you have barely a word to share.

"Despised by every God, cursed by all that lives, you yet endure, defying the world by your very existence.

"It is a wonder," she told me, "your very survival. And a greater wonder that any of you even bother. Do you like your existence, is there some pleasure you take in your suffering? Do you seek to avenge yourself on a world that tortures you? Or do you imagine that perhaps somehow the horror might lessen?"

She paused before continuing. Giving the words time to sink. She vanished from my sight. Reappeared whispering in my ear.

"Do you know hope?" she asked. "Is that it? Hope?"

I sucked in breath. Did not reply.

"And among this cursed and friendless race," she whispered, her voice insidious, "is one, just one, cursed beyond all others. One for whom the Trolls have pronounced their Interdict, one especially for whom each race

utters its hatred and thirsts for its blood. One for whom every being that walks upon two legs shall swear as enemy to hunt and hound and kill."

She stopped.

I stopped moving, only realizing as I did that she'd swept me into her spell, her dance again.

She knew me. She knew who I was. I froze, waiting.

She knew me.

We stared at each other.

"What are you creature, to be the most despised of a despised race? For what sin are you cursed beyond every other thing in the world?"

For a second, there was nothing but silence.

What could I say? What could I tell this one, who knew everything? How could I defend myself, knowing the terrible truth of her words? A truth that burned me like the sun.

I cowered. Searching within myself for any core of certainty.

"He killed the Mermaid," I said, suddenly. "This must not be done. He killed Ryssa the Kobold, and the White Bear Daughter. He killed..." I pronounced the names, all the names I knew, pouring out of me. "He killed them all, and more, all these lives, wanting to live. He killed them and made empty places in the world. These things must not be done. These things are wrong."

Exhausted, I ran out of words. I ran out of names. Without them to warm me, I stood there shivering, barely looking at her.

She stood away from me, arms folded, elbows out, her faces presenting stern contemplation. She no longer tried to entrap me with her dancing spells. Perhaps I was already entrapped, my freedom, my will, merely a thing on a short leash.

"Wrong," she said finally, "you are a strange little monster, aren't you."

I stared at her, no more words left in me.

After a time, she spoke.

"What are any of these things to me?"

"You are of the Mermaids' people."

She had to understand. She just had to. I couldn't do it myself. I had

nothing left.

"Yes, but are they of my people?"

Startled, I met her eyes then. She was Selk and not Selk? I couldn't understand it. Had they cast her out? Had she left? What did that mean?

"You say names," she said, ignoring me, she turned around and around, spinning around me, her body a dizzying assortment of faces and expressions, as I turned to watch her. "Names and more names. Who are they to me? Nobody. What do they mean to me? Nothing. What do they matter to me?"

She put a hand on her hip, body arched, her faces looked at me, demanding an answer.

"Blood is red," I said urgently, remembering all the ruined bodies. I suddenly remembered touching myself between my legs so long ago, desperately licking the blood on my fingertips and knowing that I was dying. I remembered the little Arukh doing it. Had it been like that for them? Had they seen their blood welling up from their ruined bodies and known they were dying?

"All blood is red," I said dumbly. I didn't want to think of it.

She stopped, absolutely still. Waiting for more.

"You're strange," she said finally. "You are full of things no one has ever seen in Arukh, perhaps things no one has ever seen before. What was it that made you?"

She advanced on me, her hand touching my hip. I moved back before her, my hip swaying at her touch.

"Poor little monster," she said.

She retreated, somehow pulling me before her. Bending at the knees my body swayed in time with hers as we moved together. Advancing, retreating.

"You suffer not knowing why. You don't even understand what's wrong with you, or why you feel what you do. You've been torn open without a wound inflicted."

I flinched at her words.

"But still you struggle on," she finished.

Her hand cupped my face.

"What have the Mermaids done to you?" she asked.

"What unconscious cruelty? What soft horror has been worked upon you? Better that you'd never known their touch, better that you'd never heard their song. They've destroyed you without ever meaning harm. You cannot live as an Arukh with what they've done to you."

Her lips were close to mine, the distance of a soft kiss, a softer whisper.

"I can take it all away."

I flinched, staggering back from her. Breaking the rhythm.

"No," I said. "No. Leave it. Leave me."

I fell to my knee. She came up behind me.

"Poor little monster," she whispered.

The soft compassion in her voice, free of hardness or mockery, cut through me like a knife.

"Just kill him," I said. "Anything, anything, just do it."

"Will you give me all your names?" she asked, advancing as I sank to my knees.

"Yes, yes, yes," I wept. "They were never mine to start with. Take them. Take them all. Just do it. End it."

"Kill him? Do it? End it?" she whispered, cradling my jaw in her hands. Kneeling I stared up at her face. "All these urges, all these desires. What is it that you really want?"

"Arr... Arra..." I struggled in her grip, but she held me fast.

"No," she whispered. "No. You must tell me."

"Make it stop. He hurts," I blurted. "He makes the world hurt. He makes everything hurt. Just make it stop."

And then she was gone. I slumped forward as she twirled slowly, a few feet from me. Slower and slower, but never quite still. On my hands and knees I stared at her.

"I will not kill him," she said finally. "Though he needs killing, it is not in my magic to do. There is no magic in murder, only empty death. But you've learned that already, haven't you?"

I groaned miserably, rising to my feet.

"BE STILL!" she commanded. I froze immobile. A crouching monstrous

statue.

Unable to move, I watched as she approached closer and closer. She touched me again, and I looked into the eyes of her true face. I saw myself drowning in her eyes, helpless to look away.

"Poor beast," she said gently, her fingertips closing my eyelids. "I'll not do as you wish. But I'll make you a gift..."

And if she said anything else, I didn't hear it.

I woke in the gutter, the side of my face resting in mud. Coughing, I rolled over.

A Giant was squatting, watching me.

I scrambled away, hissing at her. She didn't rise. Instead, she extended her arm, stretching out with that immense reach that Giants have.

"You're very thirsty," she said, handing me a skin.

I grabbed it. The hand slowly withdrew.

It was true. I was thirsty. Immensely thirsty. I drank. Water.

She watched me gulp the water down, face impassive. From the corner of my eye, water spilling down my throat, I stared at her.

"Thirsty little beast," she said. "Good thing I was here to watch over you. Anyone might have come along and cut your throat. You are all out of... friends. It's not safe for you to sleep."

"A sleeping Arukh is never safe," I replied.

"Too true, now more than ever. The Trolls have pronounced their Interdict and all the peoples will bow to it sooner or later. No one will defend you. A worthless little Arukh is a pointless thing to fight over, after all. You should run Arukh, run from here and hide for the rest of your life from the sight of anything with two legs. Lacking a name won't save you. It'll just spill more blood."

She stood, unfolding into the sky and strode off

"But you don't really care whose blood spills, do you?"

Astonished, I watched her go, vanishing into the distance on her long strides.

Nothing left now. Nothing at all.

I skulked in garbage, living among the rats and carrion crows. Hiding and watching. Sometimes going out boldly.

Two days later the Horsemen came for me.

It was twilight in the Goblin Market when they came. Four horses galloped thundering up from either end of the market, their fur-clad riders whooping and swinging ropes. I watched in amazement, not quite realizing what they were after until they were almost upon me.

I scrambled and sprinted away.

The rope of the closest Horseman fell and tightened around me. I snarled and grabbed it, tearing him from his horse.

He screamed and cowered as I ran toward him. I stepped onto his back, springboarding onto his mount. It reared in protest as my weight settled on it, but I had been born to Vampires and learned to ride before they had cast me out. I wheeled the beast around. One of the Horsemen was riding up to me. Our horses collided. I straight-armed the rider off his mount.

Three more Horsemen appeared at the other end of the market, to join the remaining two bearing down on me. I wheeled and galloped toward the far end of the market. If I could find my way into the Goblin warrens I could make it into the Downriver. I would be safe from the Horsemen there.

I could hide with the Kobolds for a short time if necessary. It would take them a little while to gather the resolve to cast me out.

Abruptly, a half dozen appeared in front of me. The horse reared. Ropes fell short as I struggled to control the beast. I galloped away again. They closed in from both sides.

I rode across the market toward the Dwarf borders. If I could make it that far, I could take them through Dwarfish peripheries into the heart of Vampire realms, if they dared to follow me. The Vampires would see them as their enemy. They would rouse even in the light. All I had to worry about was surviving. A rope looped around me.

I snarled and pulled at it, but the horse and rider on the other end simply moved with me. I started to reel him in as I galloped, pulling my knife.

Another rope fell over me, pulling tight. Then another. I held hard to the horse, it reared and almost fell as I was pulled off.

I landed hard and struggled to my feet, trying to reach for my knife. More ropes settled around me, around my wrist. Horses strained in different directions. I felt my shoulder pop out of joint, and grabbed my wrist with my other hand. For a moment, all I could do was stand there, pitting my strength against the horses as they pulled.

"Arrah," I snarled desperately. "Arrah!"

A horseman rode up to me, brandishing a wooden cudgel high in the air...

My head hurt. I was aware of voices buzzing.

I shook it, trying to clear the pain away. A dull hot throbbing radiated from my temple. I felt dried blood on my face, tight against my skin. I pried my eyes open, one eyelid thick and sticking with dried blood. I looked around, trying to focus. A wave of nauseau came on gently, like a tide, my I could feel it in my throat, in my belly. It passed but a moment later it returned.

They were staring up at me. Faron, the mad Princeling, Taz the Arukh, an old woman, a young woman, a couple of riders, and a gray bearded man thick of body.

My wrists and ankles were on fire with pain, all kinds of pain, red pain, sharp pain like knives, shooting pain that lanced up from my joints, and the dull throbbing aches. I had been tied, dangling upright in a wooden cage that seemed built around my body. The cage rested on a wooden framework, Humans were heaping kindling wood and dry brush underneath it.

"See what we do to our enemies," Faron called. His madness darted behind his merry eyes.

I looked around. We were in a great hall, so huge that it lacked a roof. The sun was bright in the sky. Before me and around me were benches and tables. I could not see it, but I could smell ox flesh cooking on lesser fires behind me. Lesser fires.

Mine would be the great fire.

I struggled.

They laughed.

"Your masters thought they could bring us down. They used you to try to strike at the heart of my family. You will be our lesson to them tonight at sundown," the old man yelled.

The two women had wandered away, doing womens' work as Humans marked it. The men jeered and laughed as I exhausted myself. I was poor sport, Arukh do not last as long as Humans. Eventually they wandered away, except for the Arukh, Tashifar.

He watched me for a while, and then climbed up the wooden frame to my cage.

"Taz," I whispered.

"Tashifar," he corrected.

"I have gold," I told him. He watched me levelly.

"I have the gold you gave the street shaman, the gold the Selk gave me. It's yours."

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Not here," I told him. "Set me free, and I'll tell you."

"I cannot," he replied.

"Why not?" I wheedled, "You know I have it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you want it? Don't you? You want the women it will bring you? Whatever you desire, whatever you hunger for? Wealth and luxury? You want it don't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"What will it cost you?" I asked. "Slip me a knife to cut my way free. Give me a place to hide. See that I am unseen. No one would know. You could do that?"

"Yes," he agreed.

"Then do it," I whispered.

"No."

"Why not?" I hissed in frustration.

"Because..." he looked around nervously, there were only a couple of

women in the courtyard, attending to preparations. He pulled himself closer to me, so that our faces were only a foot or so apart.

"I am of Shad-Niggurk, do you know of it?" he asked.

I shook my head.

He continued. "A Vampire city in the north, perhaps the northernmost of the cities but for Zighochinay."

"It was in the spring when the hordes of Horsemen came down from the north, the Humans rose. The city began to burn, first in places, and then the whole city all at once, with a flame that touched the sky. The Vampire lords had made some Orcs to fight for them, the city bordered the Goblin lands. But the city at our backs was burning, and the enemy laid siege at all sides."

"The lords sent a great army of Orcs out the front gates. They all died. But the lords were clever, while the great armies fought, they escaped with a small force. I was part of that force, the best of us."

He grinned with remembered pride.

"I was struck on the way out. A Human laid my head open." He tapped his scar. "I tried to ride, but I fell behind. Eventually, I lost the horse and wandered until I knew no more."

I watched him intently.

"These people found me. They cared for me. They made me well. They took me into their homes and shared their food with me. They gave me a name. They made me one of them. I will not betray them."

"You are Arukh," I hissed. "Do not forget that. They will not."

"They are my people," he hissed back. "They gave me my life. I will not let anyone hurt them. Any of them."

"What about Lerel?" I whispered, "You let them hurt her."

"What do you know of Lerel?" he snapped.

"She liked you, and you killed her."

"I did not. It was..."

"Him," I finished.

He was quiet for a second.

"I was sorry that she died," he said quietly.

"You know he doesn't care about you," I told him.

He didn't answer that. We both sensed it was true. The mad Princeling was an empty vessel. He cared nothing for anyone. He merely pretended.

"But they do," he answered after a moment. "They care. I protect them. They are my people."

He looked unaccountably sad.

"I'd heard of you. I thought you would understand."

The prospect of being burned alive, I decided, did not improve my perspective.

"Then set me free," I whispered. "I promise, no harm ever, to him or any other of your people."

"Ho Taz," a voice called. "Romance on the funeral pyre? It must be that Goblin blood in you."

It was the Prince. Tashifar climbed down so fast he almost fell. He scuttled away. The Prince cuffed him in a good-natured way. He looked up at me.

"Comfortable?" he inquired.

I snarled.

"I know what you are," I spat.

"Indeed," he answered. "I am free. You are not."

He began to climb the scaffold.

"Tonight, I'll be drunk. You'll be cooked. How do you like that? I like it."

He reached his arm through the cage, fumbled with my loincloth. I squirmed as his fingers entered me, twisting and blunt. My dry loins contracted, but could not prevent him from doing as he chose.

"I've never had an Orc," he told me conversationally. "I wonder what it would be like? You're such brutal creatures. I might have had you. But the Elders wanted it done in a traditional way."

He sighed.

"You had the Mermaid," I hissed at him.

His brows knit.

"That again? Why do you care? Why do you haunt me over a death or

two, when the world is full of it? You have killed before, yourself, haven't you?"

I said nothing. He forced his hand farther into me and twisted. Pain ripped through me and I heaved in my bindings.

"I said: You've killed before? Haven't You?"

He was enjoying himself. My head twisted to the side. I caught a glimpse of a young female figure.

He caught my look and turned his head. He twisted.

I grunted, I could feel a scream tearing out. It made no difference to him, he was equally happy to have my admission or my pain.

"I kill," I grunted and lied, "but not in like or dislike. I just kill because it needs doing."

He laughed at that.

The girl drifted closer. Surreptitiously watching us. Busying herself with chores.

"So do I. It's not the killing I like. It's the doing. It's what comes with the killing."

His hand withdrew from me as he glanced at the girl.

"We are not unlike. After all, it was just a Mermaid. What did it matter?"

"Monster," I snarled.

His face darkened for a moment, and then he laughed.

"Monster? I've never hurt my own people. Not like Orc who slit each other's throats for a piece of copper and defile their own dead."

He pulled himself farther up.

"You want a monster? Look at my sister there. Did you know that she had a baby once? One day she took it to the river and drowned it before anyone knew, before anyone could stop her. Now, no man will have her. Who wants a wife that murders her own babies?"

I spat at him.

He reached into the bars to cuff me, but stopped when he saw my teeth. Instead he just punched me in the gut. I heaved gasping for breath, dry heaving. I coughed, but nothing came up.

"Once, you put questions to my father," he said. "I'll give you your answers."

"They will fish for us, or they will die," he said.

"They will drive beasts for us, or they will die," he said.

"They will sing when we tell them, and if the song displeases us, they will die."

"And if they do not fear death," he paused, "we'll make something for them to fear.

"You ask what good is a kingdom which is only a mound of skulls? Why, don't you know that every kingdom sits on a mound of skulls! That's what a kingdom is!"

"You talk about Mermaids. Who cares about that? Selks, and Kobolds, and Vampires: Who cares about any of them? They aren't my people. They aren't people."

He glanced at the girl. She was close now.

"Maybe afterwards," he whispered to me, "I'll go fishing for Mermaids again. Would you like that? I like Mermaids, don't you? Maybe I'll take them, one at a time, every single one, until there are none left. Would you like that? Maybe I wouldn't have bothered, but you inspired me, you need to suffer. As you burn to death, I want you to know that it was you that killed the mermaids, all of them. But for you, I might have let them live."

I snapped at him, my jaws clicking shut. He drew back startled. I lunged straining my good arm, wood creaked and then squealed. He stepped back, a wary look crossing his features. I leaned my whole body forward, the bindings cutting into my flesh. Wood groaned and stretched. I pulled harder, my heart thudding in my chest, my face going thick and red. Everywhere I could hear creaking as agonized wood contested my strength. I could feel the bars bending, twisting. My muscles bulged and ached, sweat ran down my body. Still I pulled. Rawhide and rope straps stretched taut to the breaking point. So close.

Not enough. I fell back, panting.

He laughed merrily.

He began to climb down, but hauled himself up again.

"They say Orc feel no pain, that Orc can't be hurt, can only be killed. I guess we'll find that out."

"Maybe when the fire gets going, I'll put a torch right up inside you, right up inside your woman parts. That would be a new thing. Would you like that? Would you tell us if it hurts?"

For a moment his eyes gleamed with something flat and hungry.

He let himself drop, and strolled jauntily off. As I watched he gave a little jerk towards the girl. She flinched, afraid. Not normal play there, there was real fear below.

The courtyard was empty except for me and the girl. She continued her chores, sneaking the occasional look.

Finally, she climbed the steps up to the cage door, splashing oil from a bucket onto the wood beneath. She had a gourd slung around her waist. She watched me frankly, as she tipped little splashes from the bucket.

"Water," I begged. "Something to drink."

She looked at me.

"Please," I begged. She glanced around briefly and then lowered the bucket. She climbed up onto the fire pile and pressed the gourd against my lips. I swallowed. It was a thin wine.

"Thank you," I said.

She did not speak at all.

"Help me," I said.

She just regarded me.

"I don't want to die," I told her.

"I'm not your enemy," I assured her.

"I'll go away. I'll leave you all alone. You'll never see me or hear of me again," I promised.

She just watched me, with grave eyes.

"Please," I said, "this is a terrible way to die. You don't

want to see that."

She gave the merest hint of agreement.

"Set me free. You don't even have to set me free. A knife? A chance? Anything?"

She looked pensive. As if thinking it over, weighing her chances.

"Gold. I'll give you gold. Enough that you could make your own way. Gold, so that you wouldn't need anything. Or anyone."

Something flickered over her features. Still she did not speak, but her eyes narrowed. The corner of her mouth twisted.

"I'll take you away with me. Far away. You'll be free. I'll be your slave. I'll do whatever you want. I'll protect you from anyone who wants to hurt you. I'll hurt anyone you want. I'll take good care of you. I'll take you to a place where no one will know you."

Her eyes drifted away from me, to the empty doorways of the hall. My promises had been too extravagant. Still, she lifted the gourd to my lips again. I drank deeply, wine spilling down my skin.

I thought of the way she'd flinched from the Princeling.

"Do you hate him?" I asked.

Flicker of interest, and a little fear. Yes.

"Do you hate him? You know what he is? I can hurt him for you," I whispered urgently. "I can hurt anyone for you."

"Lazy brat," a voice called up. A short stick bounced off the bars of the cage.

The older woman stood at the base of my pyre, shaking her fist. The girl gave a squeak and hurried down the steps. She scurried off.

"It's always the way," the old woman spoke loudly. I could hear her clearly.

"Do it yourself if it be done proper."

She threw a bucket of oil onto the wood piled beneath me.

"Your kind has no children does it?" she called up to me. She dipped her bucket into a great wooden cask of oil. She didn't wait for an answer.

"You are a lucky folk. Look at me, now. Nine children I brought into the world. What do I have to show for it? Nary a grandchild."

The oil splashed. The relative privacy was at an end. Other women were appearing, doing chores.

"I have a daughter, skittish as a cat, and stranger still. Never says a word. Always looking at things. Even after all what happened, she could still

have a man. But once they get a whiff of her ways, they won't come near. It's a miracle that a man got close enough to get her pregnant at all. She never told his name. Pity there, I'd ask him back to try again."

The oil splashed again.

I watched as rivulets and trickles slid down the floor of the cage.

"And then my son..."

I raised my head.

"Your son..." I said.

She stopped in the act of filling her bucket and looked at me. Slowly she filled it and crossed to the scaffold. She climbed the same steps as her daughter.

"He isn't bad. He is just young. Headstrong. He'll settle down. He is too wild for just one woman now."

Oil splashed and slid along the wooden bars.

"Do you know what he did? What he does?" I asked.

She heaved the bucket hard against the bars of the cage, oil splashed over me. Soaking my skin.

"He didn't do anything."

"He cuts them..."

"He is my son. He doesn't do that." She poked me sharply with a stick. "I know what you say. I know what you are. It's all lies."

"He does," I insisted. "He does."

"He does not. He never did. And anyway, it's not our people. It's not our concern."

She stepped roughly down the rungs.

"You have to take care of your own. Stand by your own. You think other tribes will stand with us. You have no people. You don't understand. It's just us and them," she said.

She stood there at the bottom glaring at me.

"I understand," I answered coldly, my eyes glaring back.

We stared at each other, both implacable.

"You'll burn," she told me and stalked off, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The sun was riding low in the sky.

Carefully, I tested my bonds. My wrists were tied with thick hemp to the upper corners of the cage. My legs tied spread to the lower corners. The left wrist and both ankles had been slicked by oil. I could move them, but not enough. I could not reach either of my wrists with my teeth to chew through the rope. For long moments the courtyard would be completely empty.

I could not break or slip any of the bonds. I tried twisting my body, pulling at the shape of the cage itself. It gave a little and then no more. I flung myself back and forth trying to topple it, but it was too solidly braced.

The smell of oil stunk in my nostrils. I reached out and tore at the tough leather of my sleeve.

Perhaps the fire would burn through enough of the leather first, to let me break free. Then I'd storm down off the fire and kill all the warriors and escape.

"Arrah," I said softly. It was almost a laugh.

If I began to burn I would chew at my arm until the blood ran out of me. It was a better way to die than fire.

There was nothing to do but wait to die.

Waves of panic would catch me, and I would thrash and struggle desperately against my bonds, until exhausted. I would hang there, limp and gasping, until I recovered enough strength to panic all over again in desperate fury. I tested the cage again and again.

Finally, I simply hung there and watched the shadows grow long. The hall began to fill with people.

At first it was mostly Horsemen. Their women moved among them, serving. Then, here and there I noticed Dwarves. Little clusters and knots representing different totems. Come to treat with the Horsemen, I supposed. Were any among the Dwarves I had spoken to? I could not be sure.

A delegation of Vampires made its way in. Were they here to watch the show? I recognized the Cull, indifferent to all, here to see her mark fulfilled. They brought with them a retinue of Arukh bodyguards.

I recognized several of them from the Troll's house. The burned female

from the Vampire's lodge. Strange choices, I decided, to wind up with so many I knew. I spotted the little Arukh next to the Cull, still mindlessly dragging her great bronze sword. It must have amused the Horsemen, no one tried to take it from her. She snarled at a Vampire.

I almost smiled. She was such an awful slave, yet she insisted on it. What would become of her, I wondered. She'd find some other mad little obsession. She probably wouldn't live long, her kind of madness didn't last.

A delegation of Goblins appeared, a posse of clever girls and the small, wizened form of a Low Mother, only just descended past birthing age, in the center of them. It was rare to see a Mother, another testament to the power of the Horsemen.

The girls were surrounded by Hobgoblin guards, one of whom towered above the others.

"Hail Arukh," Vhoroktik called, her voice ringing through the hall, "I wish I'd killed you when I had you."

Her voice softened. "Any death but this. Any people but these."

The little Arukh stood then, and the two stared at each other for a second.

Tashifar appeared.

"Hail Tashifar," Vhoroktik bowed sardonically. "General of Men. Well do we know your name."

"Hail Vhoroktik-Khanstantin, Totzaklinh," Tashifar replied. This was almost an occasion, two Arukh Names meeting.

"I had thought the Brave Tohkzahli disbanded?" he said.

She grinned, mad, bad and dangerous.

"So the Mothers have said; will you call them liars?"

"The Mothers' words are by definition, truth," he bowed sardonically in return.

More men came, not just from the Horsemen, but from other principalities in the Human kingdom, petty barons and lords of this street or that block.

A delegation of Kobolds, perhaps from the Secret Kingdom, with their own tame Arukh handful, skulked around the edges of the crowd.

An embassy of Giants and Trolls showed, taking a place near the door. The Trolls were small against their companions. Odd, I thought, how Trolls were everywhere. Whatever happened, it seemed there'd be a Troll around to watch it. Strange how creatures so large and frightening could be so unobtrusive.

Even Selk appeared, in a small delegation of elders without guards, who found a spot on the side and sat quietly. I appreciated that they'd chosen not to bring their fighters. Speaker for Elders was there, our eyes met and he nodded sadly. His lips moved. An apology?

There was muted conversation, and jostling as people found their places. Finally they seemed to settle. The closest to me were a circle of Horsemen elders, behind them the strongest of the Horsemen. Behind them were other groups of Horsemen, other Humans, other races.

Finally the King forced his way to the front. He walked up to my pyre and turned to face the crowd.

"We feast," he spoke loudly. They quieted. "We feast with our allies. We give thanks for this land which brings us so much."

They applauded.

"We feast. But even in this land our enemies work against

us," he shouted.

The Horsemen roared.

"We have always had enemies. We have always triumphed against them."

No triumphs that lasted, I thought. They'd been driven from one place to the next, out of one land after another. They'd been a fleeing scavenging people.

"But still they contend against us."

I realized that they'd been fighting and running for so long, they no longer knew how to win. For them, there'd always be enemies, there'd always be battles. They could know no peace.

He raised his arms.

"We shall give them no peace. No rest. We shall burn them wherever they appear."

They'd just keep on attacking until they lost. Or until they destroyed

everything. I saw it clearly. They would keep on climbing until they fell. They had no other choices. The Trolls were wrong. The Horsemen were a broken people, there was no taming to be done.

They cheered.

"There are no enemies but the ones you make," I called, to jeers and catcalls.

"Your words make you our enemy," a Horseman yelled, as they cheered him. "You've slandered our Prince. You've taken your lies to every people in hopes of raising them all against us. Did you think we wouldn't come after you?"

"I've accused your Prince. I said these things," I yelled back. "It is true that I said them."

Some Elders held up their hands.

"Her own mouth condemns her," cried an Elder.

"I am condemned for speaking truth," I called, my voice cracking.

"Let her speak," Vhoroktik-Khanstantin called, grinning madly. "Let us have amusement, before the fire."

The crowd quieted, even the Horsemen hesitating, like a calm before the storm. How many of them had heard my story? For how many was it rumours without form or substance? Did they hope to hear it? To listen to my accusations as I burned? A mad Arukh, screaming maddened accusations. That was sport for sure.

Beside the King's table, the Prince sat and smirked. At the end of the table was a burning brand, hanging from a pole.

I swallowed.

"I said that a Mermaid was killed. This is true, for a Mermaid is dead and all the Selk will testify to this. And I said that other murders were done, among almost every people. And this is true as well, for the bodies were plain for all to see. I said blood has been spilled. And all this was true."

I licked my lips, my mind blank.

"I put riddles to the Horse King," I blurted, for lack of anything better to say.

They laughed.

"For this I am condemned to the fire?" I asked.

There was a blur of discussion.

A Horseman Elder stood. "You have spoken lies about our Prince, placing these deaths at his hand, and for that you burn. And when you speak them again, then shall you feel the fire."

"They are lies, then?" I asked.

"They are," he shouted.

"Then let him deny it."

There was a clamour. The Prince smirking, stood, shaking Tashifar's warning hand away.

"I deny," he yelled.

"You deny," I called.

"I deny. It is not true, any of it, not the least part." He grinned, enjoying the game.

"And if it was," I called, "if it was true, if any part was true, if you'd taken the least of the least, a Kobold, would it matter?"

The Dwarves barked laughter. Dead Kobolds didn't matter. The Prince noted this.

"What if it was an Arukh?" I asked. "Or a Totzaklinh? Or some out country root grubber? If it was an enemy? Who would any of them matter to? Would it matter then to you?"

"It would all be lies," he said confidently.

"And were it true of the least."

He hesitated.

"It would not matter. You would still be upon the fire."

"She burns for lies," said the Elder, standing again, irritated by the discussion. "Fire is the penalty of lies."

"I will burn whether it be true or not."

"You'll burn," the Prince said, grinning at the crowd, "that's all I'll mark. Let your words be like your flesh, vanished into ashes in the wind."

"What's it matter," a drunken Horseman stood. "She's named as enemy, burn her."

"It is fitting to burn me because I'm enemy," I called desperately.

"By the fire of truth: Yes!" he called back. His friends laughed.

Fire of truth? I wondered. Is that how they thought? That with fire not only liars but lies were burned away. My mind raced to find a use for this thought.

"And are enemies to be killed, burned, raped and tormented?" I asked. "Is there anything that is not right and just to visit upon an enemy?"

He swayed cheerfully, his friends egging him on.

"Nothing. Our justice is generous. We withhold nothing from our enemies but mercy."

"And are enemies all those who oppose your will?"

"They are."

"Then I've accused the Prince of nothing but justice upon his enemies."

A hushed rumble went through the other races. The Selk Elders looked sour. Vhoroktik went dark.

"Is that the justice of Horsemen?" she mumbled, loud enough to be heard. A couple of Horsemen gave her harsh looks, she grinned back at them. Hands slid down to weapons.

"You will burn me for this?" I said quickly. "How am I lying? How am I your enemy? If I claim to the Prince only deeds within his rights?"

Several of the Horsemen looked confused.

"These things are lies," the Elder stood again to speak. "And were they not lies, it would not matter, for they would be uttered against us. Regardless of the truth of your words, you have tried to employ them against us. Now you must feel the fire of truth."

"And for claiming the Prince has taken among his own friends, among his own people, his own family?"

"Your cleverness betrays you," the Elder said firmly, "for these things are truly lies and for these lies alone you must burn."

"I have not made these claims. Of all the things I have said, these things I deny."

The Horse Elder looked confused, sensing a trap.

"Shall I burn for denying these claims?" I asked, springing my feeble

trap. “What does it mean if the fire of truth consumes me with this denial upon my lips?”

“Uhhh,” he began. He halted. The hall went quiet, all eyes upon him. He thought furiously.

“Perhaps,” he said carefully, “the Elders should call council and discuss matters.”

The Horse King stood.

“Piss on that. I tire of this game. You name yourself enemy. Die by your name. Burn her. Let the Elders deliberate over ashes.”

At once several Elders and Horsemen rose to argue. The King had overreached himself.

Cries of ‘call council’, ‘call council’, rang among the Horsemen.

“We can’t drag her from the fire to address a council of Elders,” the Prince complained.

He was met with a storm of protests.

“I want to address council,” I called desperately, over and over as loud as I could, my voice breaking. Anything to get off the fire, to prolong my life, even for a few instants. Anything that might lead to a hope or a chance.

“She isn’t even one of us,” yelled an angry Horseman.

“I claim address by your custom,” I cried, my voice cracking. “If I am to die by your custom, then I claim its rights.”

“Fine,” said the King angrily. “Have your address to the council. But know that when you finish, you burn. The first lie you utter, you’ll burn.”

Several elders looked unhappy with this.

“At least,” one complained, “have the hall cleared so that we may take counsel in the proper way.”

“No,” snapped the Horse King irritably. He’d make no more concessions to Elders before this gathering. “She’ll speak and we’ll have an end to it.”

“This isn’t custom,” the elder snapped.

“Custom is what I say,” came the reply.

The hall slowly went quiet. I coughed, trying to clear my thoughts.

"Who are your enemies?" I asked.

"You are."

"Who else. Mermaids? Selks? Vampires? Are they enemies?"

They paused to deliberate this.

"They are not our people," the senior Elder carefully responded.

"And the children of these races?"

"Not our people," came the reply.

"Blood of Humans is the same as blood of Dwarves and of Vampires. Even Arukh bleed the same red blood. As red as the blood of Horsemen. You say these are not of your people. This is not true."

My voice cracked. I worked my jaw, trying to swallow enough spit to continue.

"Look upon them! Are they not like you? Do they not walk upon two legs, grasp with two hands, look with two eyes? Do they share the power of speech? Do they not all hunger as you? Who does not know suffering or joy? Is not each people cleaved to male and female? Do we not issue forth from our mother's wombs? Do we not die the same?

"You say that they are not our people. That they are not our children. I say we are all people," I called, "of many faces, but of one blood."

I felt an instants wild elation, caught up in the power of the words, in the grandeur of this truth. We were all one people! I knew it now, in a way I'd never known a thing before.

The crowd muttered angrily, all but the Selk Elders and the Goblin Mother.

I responded with my own passion. If they could not see right before them, let them look upon wrongness and see it for what it was.

"You say that these are different peoples. That Vampires are not Dwarves, and Men are not Selk. But I say to you: If you can say that others are not people like Humans, can you not say that Humans of other tribes or Dwarves of other totems are not people as your people? Are they other peoples too, to whom you owe nothing, with whom you share nothing?"

They quieted, with muted tones of rough agreement.

"If you say these things to me. Then I say to you: Within the tribe and

totem, may not family set against family? Will you say your family are your people, but other families of your tribe are not. We are all one, and if we are not one, then we are many and each of us is alone."

There was a feeling of almost palpable suspicion from them. As if they recognised a truth, but were uncertain as to whether they approved of it.

"If one family can stand apart from others. Then it must be so that one man or another can stand alone. That he will say to his brother or his father, 'You are not my people and so I do as I wish.'"

They were quiet. Listening. I gulped air.

Arukh. Then they would be Arukh, each one a race alone to their self. I understood then, why we were despised beyond all others. We knew no kin, not even each other. We deserved their hatred, because we were alien, even to ourselves.

I bowed my head, as exhausted as if I'd fought all day. The words had finally run out of me and I could think of nothing more.

"Finished?" asked the King. "Entirely finished? No more? Then counsel is done."

He nodded to the torchbearer who started forward.

I looked up, and my eyes locked with the girl. The King's daughter, sitting alone and strange at the King's table. Sitting as far from the Prince as she could.

She stared at me, and suddenly, I knew my words had meant nothing to her. She was alone in the world, she had no family, she felt no family. She hadn't even felt anything for daughter, that's why she drowned it, I realized. It wasn't part of her. She was all alone in her tribe.

And I realized something else.

Someone had put her there.

Someone had made her alone.

And suddenly the words were coming out of me like water from a brook, called not from my heart, but from the despair in her eyes.

"Look upon what stands in your midst," I roared and gasped. "You who call yourselves people. You say he is your people, and you say the others are not your people so they do not matter.

"But you are not his people," I shouted. "He has no people in his heart.

You are all strangers to him. You think he will not harm your children, your daughters. You will let others suffer and others vanish. You will watch other mothers grieve for murdered children."

"Where did he grow up, if not among you? Where did he learn his hungers, but on your children? You think they are safe? They are not safe from him. There is no safe place from him."

The Elder jumped to his feet. "Lies," he cackled, "lies in her mouth, she earns the fire..."

My heart leaped as I realized I'd lost, I'd made a terrible mistake. In accusing the Prince of his own people, I'd thrown away my last hope of avoiding the flame.

The Prince smiled, knowing I'd lost, knowing he'd won.

There was a shriek. The King's daughter leaped for the Prince, brandishing a knife.

He caught her but could not loose her from it. The whole room froze, staring. Shrieking, she fought on, biting and clawing. He could not dislodge her.

"Bastard," she wailed. "You did it! You did it!"

He hit her. From my cage I heard the slap of her flesh.

"You made me kill him! You made me!"

Still she struggled with him like a mad thing, this little slip of a girl.

"She's mad," he announced, grinning. "She's always been mad. She makes up things."

"I hate you," she cried. "You put it in me and then when I had it you made me drown it!"

The Prince grimaced in embarrassment, unable to subdue this small opponent. He hit her, hard and low.

That stopped her. Her cries choked off and her face went hollow as all the air went out of her.

He hit her again, hard. She dropped. He kicked her viciously. Her body wrapped around his boot.

The Prince leaned over catching his breath. Unbidden, a smile slid onto his face.

He snarled abruptly at Tashifar, "Get her out of here."

Then he turned back to the assembled throng, and the smile returned.

"Madness," he said. "All lies. She's always been crazy."

In the silence that followed, it seemed that we understood all at once, what made a mother drown her newborn child. We all knew what made a girl so silent and strange.

The silence seemed to grow deeper. Spreading out in palpable waves. It felt like hidden knowledge long denied. People recalled lost children never found, frightened ones grown strange with secrets, a sickness at their core that they had never turned their face to.

The Prince sensed it finally. His smile slipped and faded.

The girl crawled to her feet, ran weeping away. None dared look at her. How long had she been like this, I wondered. Years of torment, strange and skittish to all who'd met her, all that pain, all of it waiting for one word, one moment, to let the dam come crashing.

Only the Arukh, Tashifar followed her, calling softly in a broken voice.

The Selk Elders rose and walked solemnly out the door. They did not look back. The Vampire lords, all but the Cull, stood stiffly, gathering their Arukh, they turned and left.

Slowly, one of the horse Elders stood. He carefully turned his back to the Prince, and sat down again, with great ceremony. The other Elders, one by one, did the same.

An argument broke out among the Dwarves. Angry voices rose and fell. Several Dwarves got up to leave.

The Human King protested. Warriors leaped forward. Dwarvish guards drew weapons. They passed.

"Damn you all," railed the Man King at those who departed. "He's my son, and he'll do as he pleases."

"You think to judge us!" he roared. "We'll burn this bitch! We'll burn your whole city! Do you hear me! You get back here! You all get back here or you'll all pay in blood! Do you hear me!"

No one listened to him. Not even his own men.

The other races, the other Human tribes followed one by one.

Sometimes quietly departing, sometimes with blows and curses, but they all departed.

Now the Horsemen were almost alone, save only for the fugitive Arukh in the shadows, who stood and watched.

A low murmuring began among the Horsemen. Some pushed the Prince away from them. He stumbled and almost fell. Women seemed to surround him.

Several Horsemen began to shout at the King. He screamed back at them, spittle flying from his lips.

"It's her, the Orc," the Prince shouted desperately, as the human women surrounded him. "She's cast a spell on all of us."

But it was too late for him.

"It's all lies!" he screamed. "Lies!"

And then he only screamed.

The Cull climbed the pyre to face me.

"You will not see me again," she said. She touched my forehead. "Live."

I passed out.

Much later in the night they remembered me again.

The Arukh, Tashifar, wept as he climbed the steps to my cage.

I had never seen an Arukh weep for humans before. Weep for any pain but our own. Perhaps he was not one of us after all.

The King's daughter waited below, watching with her strange eyes. The little Arukh hovered a few feet behind her.

"Do it," she said to Tashifar. "Set her free."

There was something different about her. The pain, that was still there. The strangeness in her, the twists in her soul from hiding--that was there. Then I realized what it was: She wasn't alone any more.

The old King sat on the ground before us. He'd screamed until he was hoarse. He'd screamed as they all walked away. And then he'd screamed at the ones who remained. He'd fallen to the ground in a fit. Finally, he had covered his face and hair with ashes and sat alone in the hall. He looked grey, and very, very old.

"Should have killed you. Should have cut your throat before you ever

said a word," Tashifar cursed me as he wept. "God damn you. All of them, damn you."

"Yes," I said.

One by one he cut the bonds that held my cage together. He freed my ankles, and then my wrists. I could not feel them.

I stumbled down the steps, the young female steadying me, to stand swaying before the King. He looked up at me. His eyes were dry. It struck me then that Tashifar wept for him, on his behalf, because he could not.

"He was my son," he said. "You do not see things sometimes, because they hurt too much to see. I did not want to know these things. I wished other ways, and I made myself believe in those."

Did he expect a reply from me? I didn't have one.

"Even when you see. Even when you know. The wish is so strong. You say it is not this but that. You say it is all right, but it is not."

Behind us the Arukh cursed me softly.

The King looked up. He smiled gently at Tashifar.

"Look upon him. Never did I have a truer son. None more loyal. None so gentle. I hold him highest of all my men. I but wish he were my blood."

Tashifar burst into a new torrent of weeping. His world had broken apart. He cried not for the Prince, I understood, but for the pain of all those who had loved the Prince, and in the end, found nothing there worth loving.

"What kind of monster are you," the King asked, "that you turn our very hearts against us?"

All the words had run out of me. The young female helping me, I limped away into the darkness.

The drums pounded, not the food beat, another beat. Faster, more energetic.

The voice of a some big female Arukh, a Krohn as the Vampires called it, rang out.

"Four horses," she roared. "Four horses bound her, and still she stood. She laughed at them, and her laughter made them afraid."

"From behind," she roared. "From behind they struck her down. They bound her tight and carried her away to their fire. They put her on their fire, but she would not burn. The one and the many gathered to see her burn, but she would not burn. She laughed at them!"

The assembled Arukh roared.

I didn't remember laughing. I remembered only sick fear and helplessness. Desperately saying anything that came into my head, desperately hoping for something to save me, and knowing that nothing would.

The young female stood up.

"She spoke to them, and they heard her words and were ashamed. I was there," she shouted.

That was all I remembered, the feeling and desperation behind the words. Not the words themselves.

"I will say her words."

There was an answering roar.

If I stayed to listen, would I recognize the words she said? Would it be anything to do with me?

She glanced at me. I nodded. She seemed to grin, turning her attention back to the crowd.

What a strange little thing she was, I thought. She didn't, it seemed to me, so much follow me, as follow some peculiar thing in her head that she thought I was.

I knew then, that the word she'd speak wouldn't be the words I'd said, but only the words she'd heard. There would be a difference.

Mad, completely mad, I decided. But perhaps it was a better, more hopeful madness than our usual lot. Perhaps that was why I never got around to killing her.

I left. They paid no attention to me. It was just a story. I wasn't necessary to it anymore, nor it to me.

A name would come out of it, I knew. Another damned name they'd call me by when my back is turned, a name that they'd tell stories of. But the name wouldn't be me. The name would belong to something they wished for, something they looked up to, a hero, a leader, a saviour.

I was none of these things.

And so, there'd just be another name, with no one to bear it.

At least, I thought, they'd stopped telling that stupid Gnome story.

My wrists still ached. I wondered if they would ache for the rest of my life. I lead the Prince down the streets to the docks. But he was not a Prince any more.

He had no name. No eyes. No tongue. Blood seeped slowly from the scab between his legs as he walked. His mother walked with us, guiding his right hand. Tashifar, the Arukh, walked on his left. His father could not find the courage to walk with the thing that had once been his son.

It had all fallen apart. The Dwarf Totems, appalled, had abandoned the Snow Leopards, who'd fallen into ruin. The Horsemen, divided and dispirited by the disgrace of their Prince, and without the support of the Snow Leopards, had been unable to hold the Human kingdom. It had dissolved into a welter of competing factions. The Horsemen were still there, but they were no longer a power. They were merely players now. Perhaps the Trolls would tame them. All I cared about Trolls was that they'd withdrawn their Interdict. I supposed they still had a use for me in the strange games they played with our lives.

There was a boat waiting for us. A long, flat boat with a single Ublul Selk to guide it. I nodded to Slal. How had I ever reckoned that the Ublul looked alike?

We sat the lost Prince within it, and then I got on. The Ublul polled off and I watched the dock recede with the two of them standing on it.

We arrived at the centre of the Selk domes, at a landing that was more of a nest of rafts moored among the crests of underwater domains. I looked around. Here, the Mermaids had told me, they had sent Mira on her journey to the sea. There were Elders to meet us.

They helped the lost prince from the boat. Through it all, he did not make a sound.

"Will you kill him?" I asked the Speaker, almost wishfully.

"What would it serve?" one of the others asked me. None of them had spoken directly to me before.

"Mira is dead," I said.

They nodded but didn't understand.

"He killed her," I said. "He did terrible things to her."

"He can do no more harm. Why make more death in the world? There is enough suffering already. Perhaps we can lessen it."

"I don't understand you," I told them.

But they only smiled at me. Then the Ublul took me away.

"They have given him to us," Slal said trying to explain for me, "for our justice, because by the way they see things, he is owed to us. But we will preserve his life. No one else, not even his own people will promise him that."

"He has no people," I replied shortly. "In his heart, he was always alone. There was no one in his world but him."

There was no reply at first.

"That is a sad thing," Slal said eventually.

What made him that way, I wondered. Had he somehow been cast out as he had cast out his sister? Or had he, like the Arukh, been born alone.

One last time, I went to the Mermaids' Dock. The murder had brought me here in the beginning. Murder was not part of their world, it was a savage intrusion. It didn't belong among them. I would give them the end of the story, and then trouble them no more.

I just sat there and waited patiently. Eventually, they came. With the setting sun, they came.

"Hello," he said. It was the young male I had first met. Gari.

"Hello yourself," I said sadly.

The rest slowly arrived.

I told them what had happened. How I had found Mira's killer. How I had been hunted and trapped. How in the end, his own people had turned against him. I told them how his people had cast him out, and how their people had taken him in.

They seemed to understand this, when I did not.

"Don't you care about Mira?" I asked them.

"Yes we do," one told me. "We loved Mira. But now she has gone. It was

important that the harm be stopped. It is over now. There is no need for more harm."

"Let him live," another counselled. "Perhaps he will become better. Whole."

"He will never be whole," I said, "after what was done to him." But I realized that wasn't what they meant.

"And if he doesn't?" I asked, finally.

"What is lost? The harm is over."

"Come into the water with us," the male urged me. "Come and love with us."

"I am afraid," I said.

Which wasn't true. All Arukh knew fear, we lived with it all our lives and never admitted it.

But that wasn't why I didn't want to go.

I thought of the Prince, of the street shaman, of the prostitute. Empty vacant lives, alone and solitary like Arukh. For them, for us, there was no one who was not, in the end, a stranger. An enemy.

Only power mattered. The power over others. Over lives. That was the only power over your own life. I understood the Prince all too well.

"Trust me," he'd coaxed, and killed Mira.

"Trust us," they coaxed me now.

That was the Mermaid's secret. I had thought them simple. They simply did not understand aloneness, or power. They knew each other. They did not take, they shared. There was no one who was an enemy. No one needed to be a stranger.

I thought of Tashifar.

Poor foolish Tashifar who chained himself to falling idols. And yet, he'd believed, he'd loved, he'd held on to something that he conceived as greater and better than himself. Was he not better than the Prince?

I thought of Vhoroktik.

Mad Vhoroktik who denied her true nature with every breath. Who despised everything that she was. Who struggled by force of will to be

something she was not. And yet, she was loved by those she embraced. In her tears for Khanstantin, hadn't there been something true within her?

I thought of my little nameless Arukh. So desperate for something besides the emptiness that was our nature that she followed me. So desperate that she would bind herself to what she thought I was.

Perhaps we could be more than what we are. Empty burning creatures screaming down into an empty burning void.

We are born alone. We will die alone. But perhaps we do not need to live alone.

"Arash," Cara said, "do not fear us."

"Arash?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means alone," she said. "It means the lonely people."

"It is a good name," I said quietly.

"Trust us," she said, once more.

They waited.

They did not laugh as I stood and removed my tunic. Shook off my boots. They did not hoot or call as I dropped my clothes and weapons.

Naked, I found that I did not have the courage to look at them. They waited, silently.

I slipped into the water, into waiting arms.

About the Author

Den Valdron, is a reclusive writer, originally from New Brunswick, currently living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Over the years, he has published in print and online a variety of short stories of speculative fiction, and articles on obscure pop culture topics.

Like many writers, his previous occupations have included mechanic, carpenter, schoolteacher, journalist and ditch-digger. He is currently an aboriginal rights lawyer.

He loves B-movies and tries to be nice to people. The Mermaid's Tale is his first published novel.

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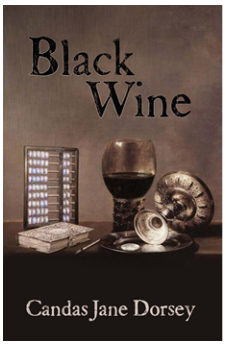

Black Wine

ISBN 9781927400357
eISBN 9781927400364
by Candas Jane Dorsey
Trade paperback 6 x 9,
306 pages
October 1, 2013

Winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award, Crawford Award, and Prix Aurora Award.

An old woman hangs in a cage; a young woman slaves on a rich lord's estate. How does a woman discover and assert her identity in a primeval, barbaric world? From slave dens to merchant cities to isolated mountains, Candas Jane Dorsey's novel is a powerful exploration of gender, identity, and freedom.

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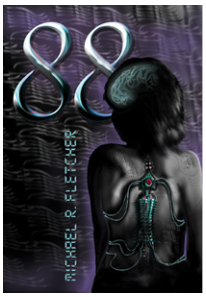
by Lorina Stephens
Trade Paperback 6 x 9,
268 pages
September 1, 2009

Sylvio spent the past decade banished from Simare's court, stripped of land, ancestral home and title - from Minister of National Security to back-country bowyer. But not any bowyer; Sylvio creates bows from laminations of wood and human bone, bows that are said to speak, bows known as the legendary arcossi.

And now, after a decade, he is called back to the capitol, summoned by his Prince whom he suspects is a patricide and insane. His very life is in danger and with it the country he has served through all his days.

From Mountains of Ice is a story of love, endurance and the meaning of honour.



88

ISBN 9781927400234
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by Michael R. Fletcher
Trade Paperback 6 x 9,
400 pages
June 1, 2013

The dream of Artificial Intelligence is dead and the human mind is now the ultimate processing machine. Demand is high, but few are willing to sacrifice their lives to become computers. Black-market crèches, struggling to meet the ever-increasing demand, deal in the harvested brains of stolen children. But there is a digital snake in that fractally modelled garden; some brains make better computers than others.

88, a brilliant autistic girl, has been genetically engineered and raised from birth to serve one purpose: become a human computer. Plagued by memories of a mother she never knew and a desire for freedom she barely understands, she sets herself against those who would be her masters. Unfortunately for 88, the Cuntrera-Caruana Mafia clan have other plans for her.

Griffin Dickinson, a Special Investigator for the North American Trade Union, has been tasked with shutting down the black market crèches. Joined by Nadia, a state-sanctioned reporter and Abdul, the depressed ghost of a dead Marine inhabiting a combat chassis, Griffin is drawn deep into the shady underbelly of the brain trade. Every lead brings him one step closer to an age-old truth: corruption runs deep.

An army of dead children, brainwashed for loyalty and housed in state of the art military chassis, stand between Griffin and the answers he seeks. But one in particular, Archaeidae, a 14-year old Mafia assassin obsessed with Miyamoto Musashi, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli, is truly worthy of fear. Archaeidae is the period at the end of a death sentence.